

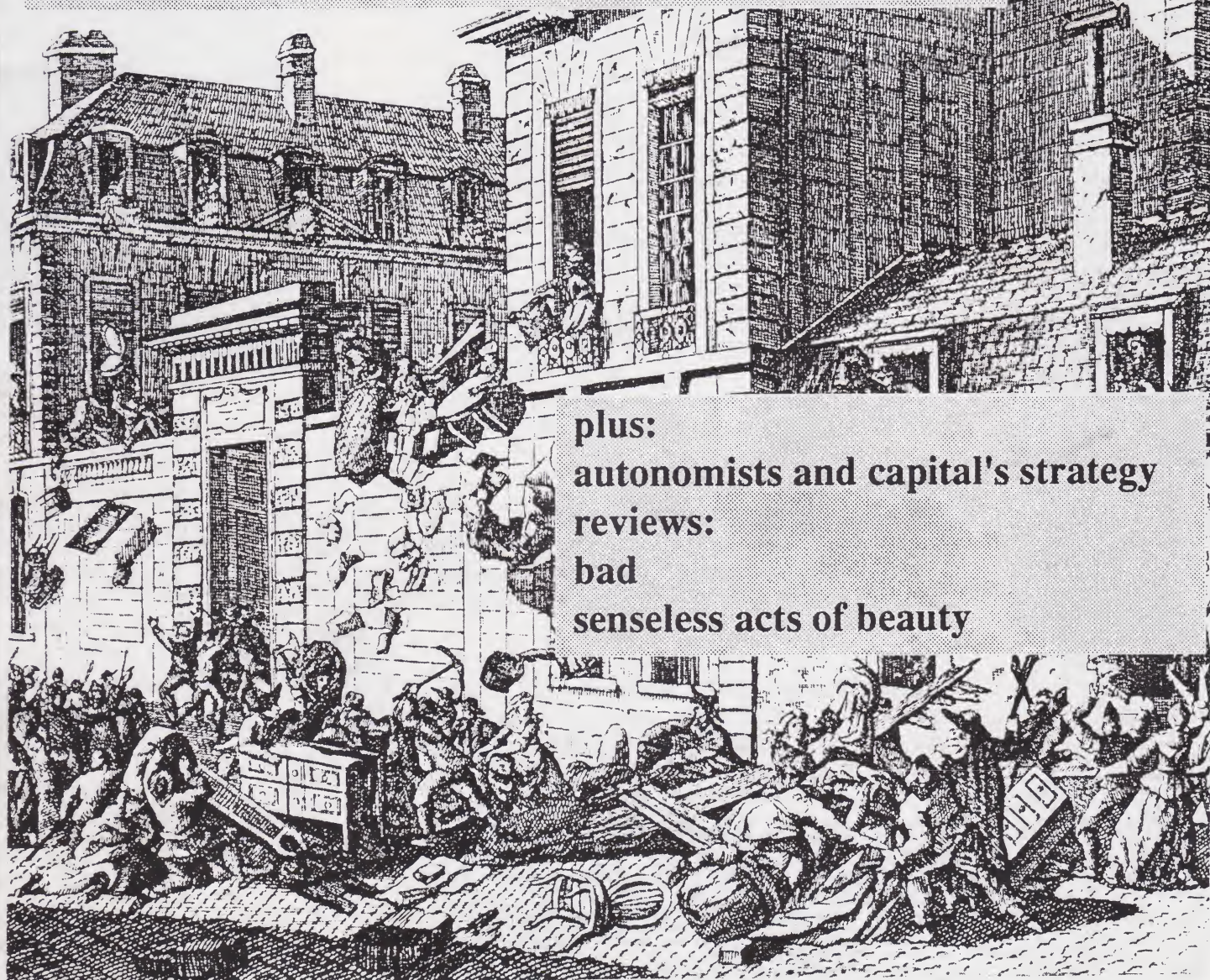
autumn 1996

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# Aufheben

the class struggles in france:

the movement of winter 1995



plus:

autonomists and capital's strategy

reviews:

bad

senseless acts of beauty

£2.00

revolutionary perspectives





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### The Class Struggles in France

Last year's social upheaval in France was one of the most significant moments in European class struggle for decades. This Editorial Introduction provides the international and historical background to our *Intakes* documents from the French events. We begin with the context of drives towards European integration, and then analyse the changing forms of class struggle in France in the last 50 years, including the 1986 riots, the '86-7 rail strike, the Air France rebellion in 1993, and the winter crisis of '95 itself.

#### *Intakes:*

##### **'Together we can invent a future'**

Our *Intakes* section in this issue comprises articles and leaflets written by participants in the 1995 winter crisis and translated from French. The first six documents were mostly produced as leaflets at the time, and describe and analyse the developing criticisms and desires among sections of the movement. The remaining three pieces are articles written at the end of the wave of strikes and demonstrations, in January 1996. They reflect upon some of the radical tendencies and limits of the movement, and provide a vivid account of the solidarity, creativity and conflict experienced by railworkers and others.

##### **Escape from the 'Law of Value'?**

One of the editors of *Midnight Oil* replies to our critical review which appeared in *Aufheben* 3. In our response, we argue that the position(s) developed in *Midnight Oil*, and re-affirmed in the editor's reply, continue to understand the dynamic of modern capitalism simply in terms of the power of capital to (deliberately) manipulate prices to attack the working class.

#### **Review:**

##### ***Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr.***

Carr, a gang-member and jail-bird in 1960s California, became deeply politicized while inside but also developed a powerful critique of the nature of prisoners' struggles.

#### **Review:**

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We slag off an attempt by the cultural studies industry to grasp the continuity in such developments as the free festivals, anarcho-punk and anti-roads movements.

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# The Class Struggles in France

Editorial Introduction to articles on the 1995 winter crisis in France

Two million on the streets burning Roman candles, waving red and black banners, and singing the *Internationale*... A strike, spreading like wildfire from one sector to another through rank and file delegations... Daily assemblies open to all... Occupations... The switching of electricity onto cheap-rate by striking workers... Rioting coal miners... Shock waves reverberating throughout Europe, echoes in Germany and Belgium... And a feeling that anything is possible..... And yet. A movement initiated by the unions. Peaceful demonstrations policed by the unions. Limited extension of the strike beyond the public sector. Silence in the *banlieue*. An agreement negotiated by the unions. A return to work called by the unions. Central demands not met. And the postponement once more of hopes for real social change.....



These contradictory appearances of last year's social upheaval in France make an analysis imperative. There is little doubt that the movement was one of the most significant moments in European class struggle for decades. The working class of France once again assumed a central role in the international amphitheatre of class conflict. In 1968 it launched perhaps the most advanced - if not the most enduring - assault on the post-war settlement. In 1995 the working class of France mounted the biggest challenge to date against European capital's attempts to destroy that same settlement and liberate capital from its institutionalized commitments to working class needs.

Around five million workers were on strike for the mass demonstration on December 12th, while a quarter of a million were on indefinite strike throughout the duration of the movement. This easily dwarfs the numbers involved in any struggles in France since '68. And whilst ten million were involved in the general strike of that year, the movement of '95 saw more people demonstrating, and more often, than did that of '68. More than two million took to the streets for the biggest demonstrations.

Was the movement autonomous? Or was it merely a trade union affair? It would be impossible to answer these questions in absolute terms. The realities of class struggle are riven with complicating contradictions even if 'revolutionaries' often see things in black and white:

**The struggles have raised echoes of the great movements of 1936 and 1968 and have placed the power of the working class firmly back on the agenda.** (*Socialist Review*, Monthly review of Socialist Workers Party, January 1996)

**In reality the French proletariat is the target of a massive manoeuvre aimed at weakening its consciousness and combativity; a manoeuvre, moreover, which is also aimed at the working class in other countries, designed at making it draw the wrong lessons from the events in France.** (*International Review*, 85, Quarterly journal of the International Communist Current, 1996)

The trade unions played a major role in the movement. Union militants, with the approval of their leaders, pushed for the extension of the strike from its initial base and encouraged the setting up of assemblies. On the other hand these assemblies, consisting of union members and non-union members alike, controlled the day to day affairs of the movement and initiated most of what was exciting about the movement. Localized autonomy was one of its key features.

In this issue of *Aufheben* we include as *Intakes* a number of leaflets and articles translated from French in order to provide documentation of this important movement. The documents we reproduce here help us to appreciate the current state of class struggle in France. However, on their own these documents are not enough. They do not explain to readers outside France how the French working class has arrived at this juncture. In this Editorial Introduction we will therefore try to illuminate these events in the light of their international and historical contexts. We need to be able to appreciate last year's movement in relation to the struggles which have preceded it and those which may follow. Our attempt to place the French events in context has inevitably been limited by the problem of the restricted availability of translated material, which may have led to a certain imbalance in the importance we have placed on, and detail we have given on, some struggles while others have been neglected. This imbalance will hopefully be corrected in the future by the increased availability of further translated texts on the recent class struggles in France.

The class struggle in France, whilst occurring within specific geopolitical boundaries, does not however take place separately to those in the rest of the world. Its parameters are determined by forces which exert themselves globally and to which nation states are tending towards responding supra-nationally. It is necessary to place the events of last year in relation to the context of European integration.



## (A) The European Context

### (i) Maastricht and all that

The leader of the French Communist Party (PCF) denounced the government's call for a clamp down on the budget deficit as 'lining up with Chancellor Kohl' of Germany, a move which 'raised questions for France and its sovereignty'. In response to this and other explanations which blame 'Maastricht and all that' for everything, it has been pointed out that the austerity measures implemented by the French government last November were required to assuage the needs of French capital regardless of 'foreign policy' considerations. Indeed much of the pressure for action came from factions in the French capitalist class who are opposed to Economic and Monetary Union (EMU).



The international dimensions of the situation cannot be ignored, however. The French economy is locked into the global circuits of capital and therefore obliged to play by the rules. Soon after their ascendancy in May '95, President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppé sacked a minister who had pushed for action on the budget deficit. The result was pressure on the franc in the international money markets and panic in the French government. After the announcement of the 'Juppé plan', stock prices stabilized and the franc recovered. All the talk at the moment about the *ideology of neo-liberalism* obscures the fact that it refers to the *political expression of the real imperatives of capital*. The global autonomy of finance capital subordinates all would-be masters of capital to its dictates - never before has the alienation of the capitalist been so apparent.

Faced with this tidal wave which threatens to wash away all the messy compromises of the past, the French bourgeoisie clearly intends to cling to the life raft of European integration. Twenty-odd years of rationalization has still left European capital with a competitive disadvantage compared to the US or Japan. Whilst European capital faces an entrenched working class, doggedly clinging on to the concessions wrought from capital during the post-war boom, capital in the US has been able to outflank the battalions of organized labour by shifting investment away from the 'rust belt' industries of the North and East towards the flexible labour of 'sunrise' industries in the South and West. Likewise, Japanese capital has been able to reduce the value of the labour-power, which

becomes objectified in its labour-intensive industries, through shifting investment away from its own highly paid workers towards those in Korea and other Pacific NICs. Since the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, capital in Western Europe has increasingly come to recognize that confronting its working class in order to be able to compete with the emerging blocs of the Japanese Pacific and the US-dominated Americas will similarly require a continental territorial perspective.

The process of European integration has proceeded at a pace unimaginable during the years when global geo-politics were dominated by cold war rivalry. By 1999, proletarians in Europe will not only sell their labour power in a unified market, but could well

find it confronted with and bought by money with a single face, the imaginatively named Euro. The working class of Europe is becoming increasingly unified, but only behind our backs, through our alienated labour becoming increasingly integrated into the social abstract labour which is European capital. This contains an inherent possibility, which can be realized only through re-appropriating our activity as struggle: that of the political recomposition of the proletariat across the continent. But whilst this possibility remains as yet unrealized, the cycles of struggle which have occurred over the last few years have proved that the entrenchment of the working class throughout Europe poses a significant problem for the project of EMU. It cannot proceed if any of the central players, particularly France or Germany, fail to meet the convergence criteria. Moreover, the signal such a failure would send to the international money markets would lead to serious repercussions.

The formation of a single currency is conditional upon nation states being able to impose upon their subjects the strict criteria for EMU agreed upon at Maastricht. Meeting the targets for public spending (below 60 per cent of GDP) and national debt (below three per cent of GDP) require significant attacks upon the social wage and strenuous efforts to hold down wage levels. It is against this backdrop that the 'Juppé plan' must be viewed. Class struggle throughout the continent is now mediated by political decisions made at the European level - the Maastricht Treaty has given the general requirement for austerity: quantitative targets to be achieved within a specific timetable. The gauntlet has been thrown down.<sup>2</sup>



The Maastricht Treaty also aims to introduce 'liberalization' and 'competitiveness' to areas of 'state monopoly' such as post and telecommunications, transport and energy. A 1990 European directive liberalized telecommunications, with state monopolies due to end in 1998; a 1991 rail transport decree (which became law in France in 1995) separates management of rail infrastructure and access to the system, allowing private rail companies access to the rail network maintained by public funds; a 1993 agreement frees up internal rail travel; while the next area for 'liberalization' will be energy, where major consumers will be able to buy power from the supplier of their choice while using existing infrastructure to deliver it.<sup>3</sup> Whilst such measures simply reflect the existing situation on the ground in the UK, they clearly have strong implications for France, the most state-dominated economy in the EU.

## (ii) Working class opposition

The winter crisis in France was not the first to result directly from measures aimed at achieving the targets for EMU (or, perhaps more accurately in this case, reassuring the money markets that these targets will be achieved). Strikes and mass demonstrations have been seen in virtually every European country over the last few years. These movements have created significant problems for the national bourgeoisies of continental Europe. But, excepting recent events in France for the time being, those that stand out occurred in Germany and then Italy in 1992. The strike wave in both Eastern and Western Germany in the spring of 1992 wrecked hopes that unification would instrumentally undermine the power of the German working class, and further strikes in 1993, 1995 and 1996 have left German qualification for EMU on a knife-edge. Indeed much depends on whether the sweeping welfare cuts announced in April this year, aimed at slashing £22 billion from public spending by reducing sick pay and pensions and eroding employee protection laws, can be carried out in the face of concerted union opposition.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst national union federations throughout Europe have been mobilizing opposition to austerity, there can however be little doubt that they remain generally committed to the well being of 'their' capitals and sympathetic towards European integration, if a little dismayed that the price to be paid for the Social Chapter is subordination to Europe's bankers. And the problem remains that, on the whole, these struggles have occurred within a strict union framework. The apparent exception was the movement in Italy against the Amato plan in autumn 1992. This autumn budget

comprised a freeze on public sector recruitment and wage negotiations, the abolition of health care for 66 per cent of families, and the imposition of new taxes on houses.<sup>5</sup> Spontaneous strikes broke out in many factories in response. The reaction to these measures combined with anger towards the trade unions because of an agreement they had signed with the government at the end of July abolishing the *scala mobile*, a mechanism for partial wage protection against inflation. This agreement had been signed whilst most workers were on holiday, in order to avoid an immediate backlash. The trade unions called for regional general strikes, and three million public sector workers took strike action. But when trade union leaders addressed rallies they were met with exemplary expressions of anger. In Florence, Milan and Turin, union speakers at rallies were pelted with rotten vegetables, bolts and ball-bearings, whilst huge demonstrations in Naples, Bologna, Bari, Genova, Parma, Padova, Venezia, Taranto, Brescia and Bergamo saw similar outbursts of anger directed at the unions. Alternative rallies and demonstrations were held, the COBAS providing the necessary autonomous organization.<sup>6</sup> The limits of this movement were exposed by the simple fact that, in terms of scrapping the proposed measures or exacting concessions from the government, it achieved practically nothing. The militants of the COBAS remained marginal with respect to the mass of workers still loyal to the unions. Italian unions have ridden this storm and retained control over the working class. The demonstration in Rome in 1994, the biggest in Italy since the Second World War, was essentially under trade union control. Nevertheless, the struggles in Italy in 1992, 1993 and 1994 will almost certainly mean that the Italian bourgeoisie will be unable to satisfy the convergence criteria for EMU in the foreseeable future.

But what of France? French qualification for EMU is also in the balance, but the whole project would need to be completely reappraised if the French bourgeoisie fails to meet the requirements. Last year's movement certainly came close to wrecking France's chances and following the end of last year's movement there was a strong feeling in France that the working class was not defeated and would mobilize again if provoked. But it is also necessary to look at this whole situation from another angle - that of the proletariat and its potential transnational, antagonistic recomposition. We must turn our attention to the major battles in the class war in France over the last few years and the light they throw onto last year's events.





## (B) French Historical Context - Capital and Class Struggle 1945-1995

## Part I: 1945-1986

**A short note on French trade unions**

A short preamble to this section is required to explain the difference between trade unionism in France and in the UK. Less than ten per cent of French workers belong to a trade union at present, an extremely low figure representing a decline in membership throughout the 1980s. For example, the membership of the CGT in 1994 was only a third of that in 1977. But this low level of membership can be misleading. The influence of French trade unions is far greater than the figures suggest, as it derives from their legal and institutional positions in the state organized system of works councils, '*comités d'entreprise*'. All workplaces over a minimal size have a works council in which the workers are represented. As well as being responsible for running facilities such as canteens, sporting activities, clubs etc., these works councils have rights to information regarding the profitability and future plans of the enterprise. This institutionalized social partnership extends all the way to the top, with, for example, meetings in which representatives from all of the councils in each Renault plant will sit around the table with the top management.

Union members and non-members alike vote in works council elections, so non-membership in France involves none of the consequences that it can in the UK. Indeed, to become a member of a trade union in France is quite a different thing to signing up in the UK where it is a relatively apolitical act of combination. In France it is an explicitly political act, nailing one's colours to the flag of the particular union federation's political affiliations. The CGT (*Confédération Générale du Travail*), the largest, is explicitly the PCF's union federation, whilst FO (*Force Ouvrière*) resulted from an anti-Soviet cold war split from the CGT, and the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique Du Travail*) is closely linked to the Socialist Party (PS). Of course, the CGT has changed a great deal of late, as at least one of the *Intakes* articles reproduced here points out, due to the historic waning of Stalinist influence throughout Western Europe, although it seemed impervious to the wave of 'euro-communist revisionism' for years. Other unions have emerged to complicate the picture, including the SUD, which resulted from the expulsion from the CFDT of postal service members deemed too militant.

**(i) Liberation**

As was the case elsewhere, many of the welfare commitments which capital has subsequently tried to rescind were granted in the aftermath of World War Two. The *Conseil National de Résistance* (CNR) drew up a programme, even before the Normandy invasions, for nationalization and social security, and for the direct involvement of the unions in processes of planning and the joint administration of social security.<sup>7</sup> Following its patriotic role in the resistance, the PCF subsequently gained the largest proportion of votes in the 1945 Constituent Assembly elections and formed a tripartite government with the Socialists and the Christian Democrats. As a matter of the survival of French capitalism, all parties were committed to nationalization (in order to prevent social revolution), consensus (rather than class war), and the modernization of France along Keynesian lines in order to prevent a return to the crises of the 1930s.

Building on the measures introduced by the Vichy government, the Popular Front and before, a national planning mechanism was established, state education was extended to the age of eighteen, and women were given the vote. A number of key nationalizations were enacted, including the coal, electricity and gas industries, Renault, Air France, Paris transport, the four main deposit banks, 34

insurance companies, press agencies, press printing shops and distribution companies, radio stations and navigation companies. A law subsequently established the '*comités d'entreprise*', giving the unions special privileges in elections to them. In October 1946, the right to strike was recognized in principle; moreover, a special status was established for national and local government employees, laying down recruitment and promotion procedures, pension rights and elected joint administrative committees.

The widespread destruction resulting from the war, whilst providing the long term basis for the profitable reconstruction of industry along fordist lines, had left the economy in tatters. Food shortages, low wages and overcrowded insanitary accommodation led to widespread discontent in 1947. Investment in the form of OECD funds provided by the Marshall Plan served to stave off the immediate threat of communism, or at least the real threat of French alignment with the Soviet Union, forcing the PCF into opposition and locking the French economy into the circuits of industrial capital policed by the US. The CGT launched a wage offensive, triggering national general strikes of railway workers, miners and bank employees in the summer of '47 and the Marseilles general strike and factory occupations that November and December. In 1948 an eight week long national miners' strike ended in defeat when a number of miners were killed, thousands were imprisoned and the army occupied the coalfields. But concessions played a role alongside repression. A national minimum wage was introduced along with generalized insurance against unemployment, and urban renewal saw the tearing down of the festering shanty towns which were breeding working class antagonism, gradually replacing them with new suburban estates or *banlieue*.

These new *banlieue* provided the dormitories for the new working class concentrations, predominantly immigrants (many from North Africa but with significant numbers from Europe and the rest of Africa) rather than internal migrants, required to rebuild the French economy. The modernization of French agriculture was initially delayed in the post-war era, restricting the number of internal migrants available for the rapid modernization of French industry. The rural population did however decline from 35 per cent of the total to six per cent in 1990, whilst the number of students increased tenfold between 1950 and 1980. Rising labour productivity provided the basis for a modern fordist economy.<sup>8</sup> The production of relative surplus-value, dependent on the application of the mental labour of science to the transformation of labour processes, allowed for relatively stable capital accumulation<sup>9</sup> along with expanded consumption for the working class.

**(ii) May '68**

May '68 didn't come out of nowhere, unless one was looking for the prior existence of a revolutionary party, or for a major economic crisis. The successful accumulation of alienated labour posited as its opposite the accumulation of frustration and hostility. The resultant proletarian offensive which rocked Paris and the world remains one of the essential reference points for revolutionaries searching beyond the horizons of the old workers' movement in search of the richness of the project for the fully developed social individual.

As such the revolt deserves to be re-examined carefully. This introduction is not however the place to undertake such an examination - space does not permit it.<sup>10</sup> We will have to confine ourselves instead to the briefest of summaries, delineating the two phases of the movement and the separation between them that enabled the counter-revolution to emerge victorious.

The 'student movement' was from the start a movement against the role of the student, developing from a reaction against the use to which power put knowledge in Vietnam to become a conscious



desire to abolish the separation of ideas from practice and ideas of separation.<sup>11</sup> In conquering the territory of the university, it had become a movement in which students were a minority and in which the very category of student was being left behind with the division of labour. Through occupying and *socializing* the university, destroying the separate roles of thinker and worker, it had temporarily abolished it.



This occupations movement was revolutionary in both form and content - the discovery of new ways of living dependent on the full participation of all involved. The situation became a genuinely revolutionary one, however, only when ten million workers went on wildcat strike and occupied the factories, thereby posing the decisive question of control of the means of material as well as ideological production. Those who had seized control over the means of production of specialized knowledge,<sup>12</sup> however, posited the same separation in the factory that they were abolishing in the university. Calls for the formation of *workers'* councils were issued to the *workers*. Unlike in the university, the task of seizing control of, transforming, socializing and thereby abolishing the factory was to be the prerogative of those who had been condemned to that particular prison by *capital's* social division of labour. The workers were expected to carry out the revolution in 'their' factories. But in the era of the real subsumption of labour to capital it is only leftists who self-identify with the alienated role of 'the worker'. The vast majority of workers remained uninspired by the ideology of self-management. Nor had they discovered a need for communism through struggle. Unwilling to make a history which was not their own yet not ready to make their own history, the workers of France delegated.

The CGT controlled the factory occupations, stitched up what passed for councils or assemblies, and locked the gates against the revolutionary tide. There was no organized challenge to the CGT stranglehold - that would have to wait until '86. In sharp contrast to the active nature of the strike in '95, the strikers largely remained the passive observers of the passing of an opportunity. The CGT negotiated the return of the factories in exchange for wage increases, and many never recovered from having to return to the old world when the new had seemed so possible.

### (iii) Recession, Austerity and Resistance

#### (a) Stage 1

The costs of containing such an overt challenge to the rule of capital and preventing such developments elsewhere only served to compound the squeeze on profit rates which were falling globally. Along with those of the rest of Western Europe and the US, the French economy plunged into recession, particularly following the

oil price hike in 1973 which saw increased inflation, balance of trade problems, the halving of growth rates and rising unemployment. Despite the fact that the Gaullists remained in power, the response was that of 'social reform', including an increase in tax on capital and increased social security. In 1976 however unemployment topped one million and inflation was becoming rampant. An austerity package was imposed by the incoming prime minister Raymond Barre in an attempt to reduce wage inflation and curb public spending. Despite a one day stoppage in protest, social security contributions were increased and a wage freeze was imposed. The second oil shock of 1979-80 pushed unemployment over 1.6 million.

The reimposition of material poverty for the 'surplus population', amongst whom immigrants were disproportionately represented, led to insecurity for those still in work, resulting in a gradual decline in the confidence and combativity of the French working class. There was rioting after a striking steel workers' demo in Paris in 1979, but this was to be the last such riot in central Paris until 1986. And the one day strikes in 1976 marked the beginning of a long decline in the number of days lost (reclaimed) through strikes, a decline that continued all the way through the 1980s (with a slight blips in 1982 and 1988) and 1990s until it was arrested in the strike wave of last year.

#### (b) Stage 2

At the same time as right-wing leaders such as Thatcher and Reagan were coming to power in the Anglo-Saxon world with explicit mandates to tear up the post-war social democratic consensus and confront the organized power of the working class, the Socialist Party (PS) came to power in France with a Keynesian reflationary programme. A commitment to increase public spending was to be guaranteed by nationalizing the remaining private banks. President



Mitterand, backed by a PS majority in the National Assembly and support from the PCF, aimed to create 55,000 public sector jobs, nationalizing aeronautics, electronics, chemicals and information technology companies, taking the state share of turnover from sixteen per cent to 30 per cent and public sector employment from eleven per cent to 24.7 per cent. Further measures designed to reduce unemployment included a reduction in the working week to 39 hours, an extra week of paid holidays, early retirement, and retraining for the unemployed. The national minimum wage was to be increased by ten per cent and family allowances boosted. All of this was topped off by a proposed tax on wealth and rhetoric about attacking the wealthy.<sup>13</sup>

The result was somewhat inevitable. The competitiveness of French companies declined whilst imports were sucked in, leading to inflationary and balance of payments problems. Capital took flight for pastures greener, and the franc had to be devalued three times in eighteen months as the global balance of class forces reasserted itself through the international money markets. The reform policy was put into reverse gear in 1982, with an initial wage and price freeze followed by wage restrictions in the public sector. Interest rates were cranked up to reimpose global disciplinary conditions upon French capital, taxation increased, welfare spending reduced, and wage indexation scrapped. The response to this dose of 'socialist austerity'<sup>14</sup> was a strike wave, but it was relatively weak and

certainly unable to counterbalance the pressure upon the French state from capital. Thus in 1984 the coal, steel and shipbuilding industries were all subjected to rationalization, resulting in a wave of redundancies. Other companies were encouraged to shed labour in pursuit of the increased exploitation of the remainder.

The French car industry was already engaged in the process of restructuring: introducing automation, shedding labour, running down certain plants and reorganizing the assembly line along neo-fordist lines in order to re-impose managerial control over the labour process.<sup>15</sup> The inability of previous concentrations of working class power to resist this restructuring, the extent to which the car worker had been fractured (particularly along 'racial' lines), and the confusion of labour at once antagonistic to capital and desperate not to be consigned to the scrap heap, were demonstrated by the pitched battles between workers at Talbot-Poissy in 1983.<sup>16</sup> Indeed a major element in the decline in strike activity from 1982 onwards has been the reluctance of private sector workers to strike, public sector workers being on average between half (1980s) and a third (1990s) more likely to strike than private sector workers.<sup>17</sup> But, notwithstanding this historic decline in the level of strike activity, there have been important developments in the class struggle, beginning with the bitter dispute of railway workers in the winter of 1986-7.





## Part II: 1986-1996

## (i) 1986: Riots Return to Central Paris

In electoral terms, the right-wing gained from the disillusionment of the working class with socialist austerity, although the experience may have played a part in the determination of railway workers in '86 to control their own dispute as the unions were tainted by their attachment to the PS-PCF government.<sup>18</sup> The 1983 municipal elections and 1984 European elections witnessed the rise of the National Front, which was supported by many PCF and Socialist Party officials in an attempt to split the right-wing vote. Indeed Mitterand changed the voting system for the 1986 National Assembly elections in order to boost the NF vote, but it was the conservative UDF (Union for French Democracy) and RPR (Rally for the Republic) which gained a majority, electing Chirac as Prime Minister to work alongside President Mitterand. Privatizations and deregulation (excluding those industries which had traditionally been in the public sector such as gas, electricity, aerospace and telecom), a reform of labour legislation to favour employers, and the refinancing of social security all formed important parts of his programme. But perhaps the most important element was the plan for outright repression of the unemployed second generation immigrant youth who constituted the '*beur*' movement.<sup>19</sup>

The 'first generation' of immigrants played an important role in the revolts of the 'mass worker', from the struggles over the assembly line to the rent strikes of the 'Sonacotra foyers' (hostels and living quarters where large numbers of migrants were housed) in the late 1970s. Marginalized by the processes of restructuring, the torch was handed on to the 'second generation' and their revolts in the early '80s, beginning in 1981 with the summer of rioting in Minguettes, the *banlieue* east of Lyons. Besides launching a cycle of urban revolt which has continued right up to the present day, the riot led to a number of initiatives to recuperate the *beurs'* struggle, beginning with the 1983 'March for Equality and Against Racism', which many young blacks and Arabs used as an opportunity to protest against racist attacks and violent police repression (despite their rejection of miserable institutional anti-racism), and ending with SOS-Racisme. This organization was launched by leftists with media blessing in 1985 with the express intention of regaining control over the *beur* movement and reducing it to a moralistic and non-violent media-oriented vehicle to integrate and destroy the real social movement and promote the re-election of Mitterand. Despite a certain degree of success initially, no doubt succeeding in preventing more riots than the cops, the organization rapidly began to lose its legitimacy in the *banlieue*, particularly after the movement had reasserted itself as a predominantly *anti-police* movement in the winter of '86.<sup>20</sup>

The '86 election had been won with a strong 'law and order' platform, aimed particularly at dealing with the *beurs*. Home Secretary Pasqua introduced a new policy against immigration and expelled 101 Malians on a charter flight, and legislation was passed by the new assembly to change the nationality laws so as to deny automatic French citizenship to kids born in France or to French parents. At the same time, the Devaquet Bill was passed, restricting what had previously been automatic and universal access to university for anyone with the *baccalauréat* (French equivalent of 'A' levels), a move which would have disproportionately affected those already discriminated against in other spheres. The spectre of terrorism, *intifada* and Islamic fanaticism was the cloak used by state terrorism, justifying routine harassment, searches and the like - and shootings. Cops were pulling out their guns and pointing them at black and Arab kids on a daily basis, on two occasions 'accidentally' killing drivers for going the wrong way down a one-way street. Years of repression and now this - no wonder that when the opportunity arose the situation exploded.<sup>21</sup>

From November 26th onwards, students began mobilizing against the Devaquet Bill, organizing meetings and demonstrating

peacefully. On the 4th of December, however, a concert to end a march at Invalides erupted into a riot with some 4,000 or so youths, mainly high school students, disrupting the show and fighting the cops, injuring 121. The following day, students gathered in the Latin Quarter to protest against police repression and proceeded to occupy the Sorbonne. Unlike in '68, however, non-students were excluded, and the whole affair served only to illustrate the extent to which students reflected the defensive nature of the times, having moved from a position of subverting their role to defending it. Later on, however, in the streets of the Latin Quarter the smashing up of a couple of shop windows and torching of a Porsche provoked the cops into attacking the crowd, killing Malik Oussekiné.

Despite the fact that the crowd naturally enough comprised many non-students just hanging out in the area, Malik Oussekiné was an Arab student. SOS-Racisme along with student bodies sought to exploit this incidental fact by excluding non-students from the funeral, outrageously proclaiming him one of 'their' dead. But since the riot on the 4th, the mobilizations had ceased to be simply student affairs in defence of the university but were seen by many as a vehicle for the expression of anger towards the police and the whole stinking system.<sup>22</sup> Many non-students turned up as well, and as the march passed near the 13th *arrondissement* police station, the CRS (French riot cops) were pelted with missiles. Later that night, rioting erupted in the Latin Quarter, injuring 58 cops. Burning cars, barricades, and looting served to demonstrate the extent to which the initial premises of the movement had been left behind, despite the opposition of many students to such a process of generalization. The repeal of the Devaquet Bill was announced on December 8th, followed almost immediately by repeal of the new nationality law.

Two things need to be noted. First, that the reluctance of many students to embrace the struggle of the marginalized and their wrecking and looting would be overcome when they mobilized again in 1994. Second, as in '68, and as would happen again in '95, the initial impetus created by a 'student movement' was followed by a 'workers' movement'. Although plans for a rail strike were already well under way, the government's climb down boosted the railway workers as they prepared for what would be an historic battle.

## (ii) The '86-87 Rail Strike

Through its exemplary quality the movement has created an incomparable precedent ('Emergency stop', in *France goes off the Rails*, BM Blob & BM Combustion).

It was the first time in France that such a large movement broke out completely autonomously while simultaneously setting up organizations of direct democracy to ensure the strike's continuation. (Henri Simon, 'France Winter 86-87, The railways strike, An attempt at autonomous organisation', *Echanges et Mouvement*).

During 1986 there had been fourteen one-day strikes organized by the unions in response to rank and file pressure. Although strike committees began to emerge during these strikes, the symbolic nature of the strikes rendered them ineffectual.<sup>23</sup> Then, in November, a non-union train driver from Paris Nord circulated a petition demanding better conditions and the scrapping of a project for salaries based on promotion by merit (read 'subservience'), proposing to '*have it out once and for all*' if the demands weren't met. Other drivers brought out a leaflet reiterating the demands and calling for an unlimited strike from December 18th. From midnight the strike spread like wildfire, without a single call from the unions, engulfing virtually the entire SNCF (state railway) network by the end of the second day. On December 20th non-drivers joined in as well.



The CGT, with a strong base in the railways, initially opposed the strike openly, tearing down strike posters and in some depots organizing 'work pickets' to encourage drivers not to strike. Finding their position untenable, they made a swift U-turn. But the strike was characterized right from the start by its autonomous organization. Mass assemblies of strikers made all the decisions concerning the running of the dispute and elected strike committees subject to recall (except in the Paris Nord depot where the assembly refused to delegate to a committee at all, seeing it as being a form of separate power potentially above that of the assembly itself, and contrawise in Caen and Gare de Lyons where control lay in the hands of the CGT). Co-ordinations between the different committees were established, beginning with local and regional liaison committees, and then national liaisons, to ensure the circulation of information and maximize the impact of the strike.

At the same time, there were strikes by seamen, dockers and metro workers, as well as patchy strikes by postal and munitions workers. And trouble was brewing amongst gas and electricity workers, and miners in Northern France. Although all of these strikes were initiated and controlled by the CGT the *potential* was there for a generalization of the struggle on the basis of the methods of the railway workers. But the government was determined to crush this experiment in autonomy before it got out of hand. The CRS were sent in to violently evict the strikers from the railway stations and signal boxes they had been occupying. The government refused to negotiate with the co-ordinations. Then on December 31st it conceded on the demand of the 'merit wages' and announced negotiations with the unions over working conditions - the central concern of the strikers.

Following the evictions there was widespread sabotage of tracks and rolling stock, even extending to the ambushing of trains in the countryside in order to fuck up the brakes. But faced with the government-management-CGT negotiations axis on the one hand and the full force of the state's violence on the other, together with the collapse of the strikes on the metro and in the electricity industry, the strikers felt unable to continue. Although the strike became increasingly violent and bitter, the sense of isolation contributed to a growing recognition of defeat and there was a full return to work by January 14th.

In one sense the railway workers were defeated; they had been battered by the cops and they had been forced back to work without having had all of their demands met. But in having taken control over their struggle, the railway workers had made a huge advance. In '68 the workplace assemblies had been mere audiences for the unions to tell the workers what was happening. In '86 the assemblies themselves were sovereign, accepting no power outside of themselves. They were not without important limitations however. Ultimately it was these limits that allowed the unions to represent the strike.

The co-ordinations were never sufficiently well organized to truly represent the movement as a whole, whereas the unions were able to claim that they represented it because they existed *everywhere*. And despite outright hostility to the unions at a local level in some places - forcing union members to remove their badges in some assemblies, expelling the CGT in others, and in most insisting that the day to day running of the strike was their responsibility alone - many workers believed that they needed the unions to negotiate with the government. But perhaps the most important weakness of this movement was the extent to which divisions imposed by the SNCF were reproduced in the autonomous movement. There were joint pickets involving all the different categories of railway worker at Montparnasse, Gare de Lyons and St. Lazare, but sectional differences remained an abiding problem. Separate mass meetings were held by train drivers who insisted on differentiating themselves from the rest of the workforce. Naturally enough this division on the ground reproduced itself at the level of the co-ordinations. Nevertheless, regardless of however else it fell short of it, the development of co-ordinated organizational autonomy

in this movement represented a significant advance upon the delegation to the CGT during the general strike of '68.

### (iii) Further Co-ordinations/Recuperations

Other struggles of the proletariat over the next couple of years demonstrated that the conditions which had given rise to co-ordinating committees in the railway workers strike also existed elsewhere. Workers in the private sector remained in a situation of precariousness, subjected to team-work and increasingly employed on temporary contracts. Between '87 and '90 the average length of the working week increased by 30 minutes whilst wages fell in real terms. But in the public sector the response to the increasing subjection of 'public services' to capitalist imperatives and attempts to restructure the workforce along similar lines was leading to a number of strikes. Whilst lacking the impact of the railway workers' strike, many of those which occurred in 1988-89 led to the re-emergence of assemblies and co-ordinating committees, and in some cases open antagonism with the unions.<sup>24</sup> Particularly important was the nurses' strike between March 1988 and January '89; this occurred in practically non-unionized sector, tempting the government to deal with the co-ordination and thereby posing a threat to the mediating role of the unions. Also, workers at *Banque Nationale de Paris* (a state-owned bank) held assemblies, formed strike committees and established co-ordinating committees during a two month strike in 1989, attacking and ransacking the local offices of the unions who negotiated a return to work behind their backs.<sup>25</sup>

The *lycée* (secondary schools) movement of autumn 1990 however demonstrated that the *form* of the co-ordinating committee is no more a guarantee of autonomous *content* than workers' councils. In that movement (for more money, better buildings and more teaching staff) two co-ordinating committees were established - one close to the JCL (PCF youth federation), the other close to SOS-Racisme - which aptly illustrated that the open and democratic nature of the co-ordinations was no assurance against their political recuperation. The TV seized upon media-friendly 'leaders', but the *lycée* students tended to reject them and their co-ordinating committees, preferring spontaneous violence to dialogue with leftist recuperators.<sup>26</sup>

The demonstrations were characterized by clashes with the police, in which kids from the *banlieue* were particularly involved, and the emergence of looting as an aspect of mass demonstrations. The media tried to split the movement by criminalizing the '*casseurs*' (hooligans, wreckers) in the hope that, as they had in '86, students would disown them. But this was a movement of high school students rather than university students and thus closer to the harsh realities facing lower order labour-power. Many *casseurs* were ex-students, but more significantly many students recognized that they too might be in the same situation as the *casseurs*. This awareness enabled the movement to embrace the involvement of 'outsiders' and take up the themes of the revolt in the *banlieue*.

On the terrain of the *banlieue* themselves there was to be a heat wave the following spring. In Vaulx-en-Velin (a suburb of Lyons), cop cars were being smashed up regularly from February onwards to avenge the killing of Thomas Claudio, and more than 600 cops had to be mobilized following the ram-raiding of a cop shop with a BMW. In Sartrouville (suburb to the North West of central Paris), on the 26th, 27th and 28th of March, three days of rioting followed another death, with further incidents on April 10th. Cops were attacked with stones and *petanque* balls, plainclothes cops beaten up, cars burned and a furniture shop set on fire. TV journalists were systematically attacked and a TF1 camera stolen.

But if the left had proved incapable of recuperating those who knew French society had rejected them, an alternative was offering itself in the aftermath of the Sartrouville riots. Whilst cops guarded the supermarkets, the streets were being watched by 30-40 year-old North Africans wearing the green armbands of Islam. A spate of murders to which the rest of French society seemed indifferent, the rise of Le Pen, institutionalized racism, and the rage against anti-



Arab media manipulation during the Gulf War - all of these factors combined to produce a climate favourable to the development of Islamic rackets; and following the riots Islamists attempted to reinforce the ghettoization of the *beurs*. The anti-Semitic forgery, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', was circulated; and, journalists, shopkeepers and the Mayor of Sartrouville were criticized as *Jews* in meetings held to discuss what to do next.

The left wants the *beurs* to identify themselves with the *nation* whose subject they are. The Mullahs encourage the *beurs* to identify themselves *ethnically*. Neither want them to identify themselves in terms of what they *do*. But other ideologies compete for their minds. Excluded from work, they are nevertheless seduced by the images of consumption and the *French* way of life they depict. Whilst the Mullahs are content with the Koran, the *beurs* want these things, and want them immediately. And they *can* gain access to the commodities of French society by involvement in the black economy or through joy-riding, ram-raiding and looting. Through these collective criminal activities, the *beurs* share not only the wealth of modern society but also in the construction of an identity. This identity is neither 'ethnic' nor 'French' but subverts both categories. It is constructed socially, as they are, but through opposition rather than acceptance. It is antagonistic to both backward and modernist variations of hierarchical society. Moreover, it is one which is constructed alongside the marginalized 'French' kids and 'Jewish' kids of the *banlieue*, through the formation of 'multi-ethnic' territorially delineated gangs. The *beurs* have more in common with these other excluded subjects than they do with the Mullahs. Furthermore, women in particular will not want to renounce the freedoms of bourgeois society for the subjugations of a theocratic one.<sup>27</sup>

The experience of blacks in the US has demonstrated, however, that this separatist ideology can be extremely influential amongst the most marginalized. As in the US, the youth of the French ghettos waste much of their anger on gang fights and the like. We should resist the fetishization of violence that forgets to question the ends to which it is used. But, in LA in '92, gang rivalries and separatist ideologies were superseded practically through ferocious anti-hierarchical violence. As we shall soon see, such a supersession also occurred in France in March '94.

#### (iv) Truck Drivers '92

The relative failure of the first co-ordinations and their subsequent political recuperation, compounded by fragmentation and restructuring in the public sector, led to a gradual decline in the tendency in working disputes towards forming co-ordinating committees. The result has been a tendency towards localization - fragmented struggles concentrating on localized autonomy of action.<sup>28</sup>

The truck drivers' strike in the summer of '92 was characterized by a refusal of mediation through virtual non-organization and an emphasis on spontaneous activity. Public sector strikes in the spring of that year had seen off Edith Cresson, who had prioritized the fight against inflation on replacing Rocard as Prime Minister. But, despite the problems they posed for the project of restructuring the public sector, these public sector strikes remained the usual uninteresting affairs. The truck drivers actions on the other hand captured the imagination on a wide enough scale for the Carling Black Label ad men to base a TV commercial on them.

In response to the announcement of a new points system for driving licences which they saw as a potential threat to their jobs, the truck drivers blockaded the motorways. Riot police and soldiers used tanks to break up some blockades but new ones sprang up in their place. Refusing mediation, communicating locally by CB radio rather than establishing committees, they just waited for the government to accede to their demands - which they did when major industries began to complain about the damaging effects of the strike. By paralysing the arteries of commerce, the truck drivers caused one billion francs of damage to the tourist industry and cost

Spanish fruit firms 150 million francs. More significantly, the strike revealed the vulnerability of the 'just-in-time' factory regimes which had built on the neo-fordist experiments of the '70s.<sup>29</sup> Renault and Peugeot had to close car assembly plants due to shortages of parts whilst the production of Michelin tyres was disrupted.

Whilst the truck drivers' victory was important, it did not serve to bury the culture of defeat and subjection amongst workers which had been produced during the long period of PS rule. But such a transformation occurred the following year when the honeymoon plans of the new conservative government were rudely interrupted by trouble on the runways.

#### (v) Air France '93

The PS lost out in the National Assembly elections in March '93, although Mitterand remained President. A significant minority of the electorate (33 per cent voted for the RPR and UDF, sufficient to give them 80 per cent of the seats in the new parliament) was unhappy with the sacrifices which had *supposedly* made the French economy one of the strongest in the industrialized world.<sup>30</sup> Notably, unemployment had risen from 1.7 million when Mitterand took power to 2.9 million, no longer only affecting blacks and Arabs but making the rest of the population feel insecure and concerned about its social costs. Not the least of which was the continued destruction in the suburbs - particularly worrying for the *petit-bourgeoisie* who voted for the right.

In 1991 France had signed the Maastricht Treaty and joined the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM), committing the French government, of whatever shade, to pursuing the 'Franc Fort' policy of tailing the relatively strong Deutschmark. This circumscribed the government's ability to deal with the onset of recession in late 1992 through monetary policies (interest rates etc.), leaving only budgetary (tax and spending) and structural policies - exactly the kind of 'head on' measures liable to provoke a working class response.

The incoming government under Edouard Balladur faced a dramatically deteriorating economic and financial situation.<sup>31</sup> A sharp downturn in the economy at the end of 1992 had led to both an unexpected shortfall in tax revenues and an increase in social spending as unemployment rose. As a result, the government's budget deficit, which only six months before had been comfortably within the Maastricht convergence limits, was now projected to double to 5.8 per cent of GDP and was threatening to spin out of control. In response to this financial and economic situation, Balladur's government announced a package of tough economic measures. The package comprised making workers in the public sector work for 40 instead of 37.5 years to qualify for a pension, freezing public sector wages, and increasing hospital charges. Shopkeepers and other *petit-bourgeois* elements on the other hand were rewarded with grants and other forms of assistance. They were further appeased by the race card the government had used to steal votes from the National Front. Nationality laws and immigration procedures were to be tightened up once more.

The proposals met with only muted opposition from the PS and PCF. The CGT, alone amongst the unions, held a day of protest, but this was a damp squib of an affair. Although the size of the government's majority in relation to its proportion of the votes had produced an air of unreality and a gulf between government and electorate, this lack of opposition to a pretty drastic assault on living standards did not bode well for the prospects for class struggle against the overhaul of the state. Which is why, when frustrations did surface, the struggles were so significant.

The government embarked on a series of privatizations: June '93 *Crédit Local de France*, October '93 *Banque National de Paris*, November '93 *Rhone-Poulenc*, January '94 *Elf Aquitaine*, May '94 *Union des Assurances de Paris*, November '94 *Renault*, etc... Shares in nearly all of these privatized companies have fallen since they were floated and, now that they are no longer shielded from the blackmail of competition by state protection, squeezing more



surplus-value from their workers in order to arrest their decline is the logical response. And the threat of privatization, along with European directives demanding liberalization, has loomed large over industries that remain part of the state sector. The fear of being fragmented from the state sector and subjected to the discipline of the market has played on the mind of workers in the post office, telecom, EDF-GDF (*Electricity de France* and *Gaz de France*), RATP (the Paris public transport authority), SNCF and Air France ever since.

The privatization programme was however only one aspect of the government's plans to drastically accelerate the process of industrial reorganization and the restructuring of the wage relation. Fundamental to these plans were legislative changes to reflect in labour laws the *de facto* situation in the 'post-fordist' social factory. The Five Year Employment Law, supposedly aimed at reducing unemployment, comprised removing job protections guaranteed by the Popular Front and Liberation governments. But first the government tried to push through a programme of rationalization in one of those industries still directly under state control - Air France. Four thousand workers were to be sacked, with reduced wages, increased productivity and new functional hierarchies for the remainder.

The response by Air France employees was both massive and determined.<sup>32</sup> A national one-day strike called by the unions for October 12th was rapidly spread and extended to all sectors, bringing together all categories of ground staff for the first time since '68. Almost immediately, strikers began to take action to increase the effectiveness of the strike by occupying runways to prevent planes from taking off. The government stated that the plan was 'irrevocable' and sent in the CRS. On October 20th at Roissy, strikers blocking the runways responded to police intervention by launching a vehicle at their lines (missing them and hitting a plane). On October 21st at Orly there were violent confrontations on the runways between the CRS and strikers, masked and tooled-up in anticipation, using vehicles against the cops' water cannons, and further confrontations the next day with strikers smashing windows in the terminal. On the same day in Toulouse strikers blockaded the runways and the central railway station. Unable to break the strike by force, unable to get the strikers to accept a compromise, and unable to withstand the huge losses the strike was causing, the government withdrew its plan on October 24th and the manager of Air France resigned.

The strike was characterized not only by its violence, but also by its organization and its openness. A significant minority of strikers were consciously hostile to the unions, but the unions were generally given reign to control the formal organization of the movement - organizing the general assemblies, co-ordinating the different sites within and between airports, and handling negotiations with the government. The CGT in particular had learnt the lessons from the '86 rail strike and adapted their approach to the assemblies in order not to provoke the re-emergence of non-union co-ordinations. Nevertheless, when it came to *actions* the unions were practically outflanked. During the 'hot week' at Orly the morning general assemblies called by the unions were quickly terminated by cries of 'to the runways!', where tactical discussions around immediate practical objectives took place outside of union channels. And when the FO (and in some places the CGT) called for a return to work following the government's revocation of the 'irrevocable' plan in order that workplace elections could go ahead, assemblies voted for a continuation of the strike - at Orly 3,000 marched on the police to demand the dropping of charges, and at both Orly and Roissy victory demos were held on the runways on October 26th. Furthermore, despite a degree of corporatist pride and identification with the well-being of the company, not unusual in the state sector, the movement was open. Divisions within Air France (freight vs passenger, white collar vs blue collar etc.) were broken down, and 'outsiders' were welcomed - the strikers received huge popular support.

The most significant aspect of the strike however was the blow it had struck against the bullish new government so early in its term, and the boost it had given to the rest of the working class in the face of the timidity of the unions.<sup>33</sup> Wary of sustaining another defeat, the government turned its attention to an area where it reasoned that the forces of opposition would be weaker - training. Youth unemployment was high, the unemployed relatively disorganized, and the student movement not directly concerned with the issue of wages. The government argued that youth unemployment was a result of high labour costs and attempted to impose a reduction in the youth wage, the CIP (*Contrat d'Insertion Professionnel* or 'beginning work contract'), only for it to explode in its face.



#### (vi) Youth Revolt March '94

The government's defeat at the hand of the Air France strikers only served to increase the popular perception that the right-wing government lacked legitimacy. There was a pervasive air of alienation from the political sphere, and this extended to the PS and PCF as well. The rejection of the usual channels of discontent was expressed in January '94 when a demonstration in Paris against a law authorizing regional and city authorities to fund private (predominantly Catholic) schools was taken as an opportunity to vote with the feet. Between 600,000 and one million people took to the streets, many of whom had no real concerns about the educational issue but wanted to express their general opposition to the government and frustrations with society in general.<sup>34</sup>

The demonstration was peaceful, which is partly why it has almost been forgotten, overshadowed as it has been by the confrontations which rocked France on either side of it. Incidentally, the law was scrapped as unconstitutional. But the demonstration was significant for establishing a practice of responding to unpopular decrees from above by taking to the streets *en masse*, taking the



opportunity to develop a popular but diverse unity of opposition therein, and using the demonstrations to protest against a general malaise without having to go through bureaucratic channels. This demonstration can be seen as a prelude to those against the Juppé plan when exactly the same phenomenon occurred, but repeatedly, on a wider scale, and connected with a strike wave.

If the peacefulness of this demonstration marked a break with the violent tendencies of the *lycée* movement and Air France strike then such a tendency was to be quickly re-established. In February '94 French fishermen rioted, and, in an attempt to hit the cops with distress flares, burned down the 'Breton parliament' (a local court building) in Rennes. Although some other elements used the opportunity to have some fun, it remained a strictly sectional affair, defined by opposition to measures affecting the fishing industry. But the following month saw the emergence of a movement which combined the tendency towards violent confrontation with that of using demonstrations to express an opposition held in common by different social groups.

On February 24th the government presented the CIP, allowing employers to take on first time wage-slaves at only 80 per cent of the legal minimum wage, establishing a '*SMIC-jeune*' or minimum wage for youth.<sup>35</sup> The response to this 20 per cent wage cut for young proletarians was a month of almost daily marches which increasingly tended to become full blown riots. Prime Minister Balladur became 'haunted by the fear of an explosion of the May 1968 sort' whilst President Mitterand began to talk of the danger of 'imminent social revolt',<sup>36</sup> and on March 30th the government conceded defeat.

The movement was unprecedented. Although in some respects it marked a continuation of tendencies which had been emerging in the 'student' movements of '86 and '90, the Air France strike and the recent schools mobilization, it nevertheless had a *unique* character.<sup>37</sup> The CIP created an immediate basis for unity between different types of students, workers, and the unemployed. Each sector was concerned to fight an attack on the terrain, defined *socially*, as that of the wage relation - the fundamental social relation of capitalist society - but on the terrain defined *physically* of the streets.

The movement was diffuse - both spatially and organizationally - and stronger for it. Spatially, it was the first movement which was not dominated by the gravitational pull of Paris;<sup>38</sup> marches happened in Lyons, Nantes, Rennes - literally *everywhere*. Organizationally, the movement was characterized by an almost complete absence of legitimate representation. The movement made use of the traditional structures - the unions, including the student unions UNEF, UNEF-ID and FIDL, and the co-ordinations of technical university institutes - which were used for the initial mobilizations and to develop the movement nationwide. Assemblies were held in university buildings which had been occupied by striking students. But as the interaction of the subjects in the streets developed its own dynamic, formal structures, and the unions in particular, became marginalized. The level of organization characterizing the movement was fluid and unstructured, arising spontaneously out of the marches themselves. This outflanked attempts by the unions to establish march monitors/stewards. Thus the movement developed in a direction that was both haphazard and powerful.<sup>39</sup>

The movement was also heterogeneous. No single social subject asserted hegemony over it. It was not a 'student movement'. When the state came to analyse the composition of the 5,000 or so arrested during the course of the movement, 30 per cent were found to be university and technical students, 30 per cent secondary school students, and 30 per cent unemployed or precarious workers. The gangs from the *banlieue*, including *beurs* who were also angry about the ID checks and nationality laws recently introduced by the government, were incorporated without being neutralized. This heterogeneity gave the movement a truly *proletarian* character, breaking completely, in the direction other movements had only pointed, with the politics of the labour movement.

What characterized the movement more than anything, however, was its systematic and targeted violence. Initially defensive and determined to resist the state's attempts to physically repress the movement, it brought the *intifada* from the peripheries to explode in the centre of the metropolis. The lack of any centralized organizing structure allowed for differences, however. In Nantes, for example, there was night after night of violent clashes with riot cops guarding the prefecture, but in the main shops were spared, some having their windows smashed but not looted. In Lyons on the other hand, not only were there daily clashes with the cops, but over 200 shops were looted. And in both Paris and Lyons cars left along the route of the marches were routinely wrecked or torched. Indeed the police had to ban parking along the proposed routes of demonstrations in Paris and insist that shops within a mile radius put up their shutters.

This endemic violence was extended from the movement's most apparent enemy - the cops - to a more insidious one. Television crews and anyone else with a video camera were confronted, their equipment smashed up, and chased from the demonstrations. These attacks were not just a response to the immediate threat posed by this equipment<sup>40</sup> but was also a response to the media role in the government's attempt to divide the movement.

The government sent the CRS in hard and made thousands of arrests. But, as it had been with the Air France dispute, it was concerned not to get into a continually escalating spiral of confrontations for fear of where it might lead.<sup>41</sup> The state needed to be able to target its violence, and thus needed to get the movement to disown the *casseurs* which it had identified as the most dangerous subjects. In Paris and Lyons efforts were made to intercept the multi-ethnic gangs from the *banlieue* as they arrived at Metro and railway stations linking the centre to the peripheries, and efforts were made, helped by union stewards in some cases, to single them out on demonstrations. But the main tactics were ideological. That old scumbag Pasqua, who had overseen the murderous period of '86 and had come back to preside over the latest bout of state terrorism, defended the right to demonstrate but said he would not permit thousands of hooligans to come in from the *banlieue* and attach themselves to demonstrations in order to engage in street fighting and looting. He then expelled two Algerian kids from Lyons in order to give the impression that the violence was ethnic in origin. After having tried to paint the movement as a whole as nothing more than one of mindless hooliganism, the media quickly picked up on this theme of a division within the movement between the 'respectable students' and the *casseurs*.

But the movement refused to be divided. '*Nous sommes tous des casseurs!*' (we are all wreckers!) was one of the slogans used to counter this propaganda offensive. Another was simply to argue that it was the government and capitalists who were the real wreckers. The movement, except for the union stewards who also wanted to rid the movement of this element, refused to accept that the phenomenon of 'wrecking' was down to a separate contingent who could be disowned. On March 25th in Paris all of the sections of the march demanded the freeing of comrades arrested, '*casseurs*' or not, during the confrontations. The movement as a whole had come to accept the legitimacy of the methods which the youth from the *banlieue* had brought to the movement. Hence when the government tried to split the movement by conceding to university students, restoring the legal minimum wage for those with a two-year university diploma or its equivalent, those students insisted on remaining with the movement as a whole until the government backed down completely. University students had recognized that, rather than being the bosses of the future, most of them looked forward to a future in which they would remain (skilled) proletarians, possibly even unemployed ones at that.

#### (vii) The stage is set

We arrive almost on the eve of battle and it is time to assess the troops. This short survey of class struggle in France since the Second World War has revealed something quite important. The working



class has for sure been on the defensive since the heady days of '68. Inevitably such a rearguard campaign has meant that there have been many defeats. But there has been no defeat on the scale of the miners' strike in the UK. There has been nothing to send a signal throughout society as a whole that the boot is firmly on the other foot. In the UK it has been a pretty sure bet that kicking up a fuss will lead to defeat. But quite the opposite is true in France. What lessons would the working class of France have drawn from the major battles with the state of the '90s? Surely the main one would be that taking to the streets can defeat the government - that active opposition bears fruit.

This is not to say that capital has not succeeded at all in restructuring the factory. As we have seen, workers in the private sector feel less inclined to take strike action. Nevertheless private enterprises are far from having eliminated strikes altogether. For instance, in March '95 a spontaneous strike wave paralysed Renault plants throughout France by blockading or occupying the plants.<sup>42</sup> Nor is it to say that no progress has been made in rationalizing the 'welfare burden'. But, as we have seen, attempts by the state to

restructure the reproduction of labour-power (Devaquet Bill or CIP for instance) have been repulsed.

What of the union question? Following the initial experiments with the co-ordinating committees, we have seen a tendency towards seizing control over the actual *daily activity* of struggles but, rather than making a direct organizational challenge to the mediation of the unions, allowing the unions to play the role of *representing* the movement and *negotiating* for it. And why not? Alternatives to unions tend to become alternative unions as a result of having to perform the negotiating role. In these recent struggles in France the negotiating position has been made clear to the unions at the grassroots level - repeal of the law, or the bill, or the plan. It has been absolute. A single measure on the one hand and outright opposition to it on the other. What room does that leave for a 'sell out'? But what happens to the opposition when that single measure becomes split up into a number of measures and the unions have been left to resolve the situation - does the opposition fragment as well?





## (C) The Social Movement of November - December 1995

### (i) Paris in Spring

If the French state's economic strategy had been in any way blunted by a right-wing government having to compromise with a socialist President then that problem would be resolved in May '95 with the election of Jacques Chirac, bringing to an end fourteen years of Mitterrand's rule. In March '95, France had been brought to a virtual standstill by simultaneous air, rail and urban transport strikes, to which the Presidential candidates had responded by exuding sympathy. This understanding approach was used in Chirac's successful electoral platform, which promised to put employment first (unemployment had now reached 3.3 million), increase wages, cut taxes, heal the country's 'social fracture' and protect social welfare benefits.

Alain Juppé was installed as Chirac's new Prime Minister. The rent-fixing scandal, involving his acquisition, when Mayor of Paris, of city-owned luxury flats at bargain rents for his friends and family, coming hot on the heels of other corruption scandals and exacerbated by the resumption of nuclear testing in the Pacific, sent the government into an unprecedented slump in the opinion polls. But priorities lay elsewhere. U-turns and broken promises on economic priorities had led to speculation that the government would fail to cut the public sector deficit enough to keep to the timetable for EMU, and consequently there was a run on the franc. On October 6th Chirac was overheard muttering 'The priority is to avoid a monetary disaster. The government has not convinced the financial markets. We must send signals.'<sup>43</sup>

### (ii) Autumn Rumblings

The statement above reflected the situation which existed *after* the September budget for 1996 which included a freeze on public sector wages, a measure over which Juppé publicly refused to negotiate with the unions. The job security, retirement rights and conditions of workers in state owned companies like France Telecom and the SNCF were also effectively denounced as special privileges. Trouble had already been brewing in the public sector, with a series of local strikes and occupations in the post office against the piecemeal introduction of a restructuring plan, and over 700 strike notices issued in the SNCF on top of regular wildcat strikes. The response from the public sector unions to the pay freeze was to organize a day of united public sector strikes and demonstrations for October 10th.<sup>44</sup> Over three million went on strike for the day, the biggest such stoppage for over a decade, with the demonstrations mobilizing 382,000 (according to police figures). The scale of this protest gave a clear signal to the unions that further calls would be heeded.

Meanwhile science and technology students returning to studies in Rouen from their summer holidays had started an indefinite strike against a spending cut resulting from the Bayrou plan which was endangering their adequate reproduction as technical labour-power, demanding twelve million francs for more teachers and equipment, and demonstrating the extent to which the grim realities of survival had come to replace the hope for real life as the central concern of students over the years since '68. A strike committee was formed and the strike quickly became an active one, seeing 1,000 students blockade Rouen's rail traffic on October 16th, followed by motorway blockades and toll-booth occupations. On October the 25th the university administration offices were occupied and barricaded, whilst the police were kept busy by a student demonstration elsewhere, only to be violently evicted by the cops that night. This only resulted in an escalation of the strike, however. Over a thousand students demonstrated in protest at the eviction and humanities students joined the strike.

By the first week of November, having had an offer of six million francs rejected by the Rouen students assembly, and remembering '86 and '94, the government was sufficiently

concerned about the possibility of the movement's extension to concede nine million francs to end the strike. But far from containing the movement within this one university, this concession encouraged it to spread throughout the provinces. Within the next fortnight, students in Metz, Toulouse, Tours, Orleans, Caen, Nice, Montpellier, Perpignan and elsewhere staged strikes and demonstrations, each raising demands for greater funding, and on November 16th students in Paris finally joined in the movement.<sup>45</sup> More than 100,000 students demonstrated across the country on November 21st, three days before the first big demonstrations against the 'Juppé Plan', and on the November 30th student demonstration the numbers swelled to 160,000 as railway and other workers joined in with their banners as students had the demonstrations against the 'Juppé Plan' on November 24th.

This mobilization gave an added impetus to the spreading of the public sector strike following the November 24th day of action. The fact that it was about money, plus the fact that many students defined it as 'a social movement rather than a student movement', made it easy for the two movements to grasp their connection. But the student movement *as such* began to subside just as the struggle elsewhere was picking up, with those students who wished to participate dissolving themselves into it as individuals - proletarians - rather than constituting themselves as a separate body within a coalition of specific groups. Part of the reason for this was the disastrous outcome of the student co-ordinations meeting in Paris. Delegates from the provinces, where the movement was strongest, tended to be representative of assemblies whilst those from Paris, where the movement was relatively weaker, tended to be hacks from the student unions or leftist groupings. Centring the co-ordinations in Paris therefore resulted in a high degree of politicking and ideologically-motivated sectarian rivalry which alienated those who wanted to take the movement forward. At the University of Jussieu on November 23rd, the nationally co-ordinating body unsuccessfully tried to exclude students who, having two days earlier looted the university book shop, had just overturned a number of cars, thrown molotovs at the cops and raided the canteen. The result of separating the political representation from the social movement ended in chaos when the excluded finally gained admittance. The student co-ordination appears to have disintegrated soon thereafter, unable to contribute anything useful to the unfolding of events apart from a lot of hot air.

However, the main reason for the subsidence of the student movement was the government's policy of selective appeasement. On December 2nd the government opened negotiations with student representatives and conceded to their demands in order to split them off from the rest of the movement, a tactic which would be repeated with great success with the railway workers a week or so later.

### (iii) The 'Juppé Plan'

On November 15th Alain Juppé revealed his package of measures to cut the deficit of a welfare budget argued to be heading towards bankruptcy.<sup>46</sup> This set of measures was seen as crucial for reassuring the foreign exchange markets that France would be able to stick to the Maastricht timetable.

The austerity package was such that many of the measures only had a direct impact on workers in the state sector. Above all, workers in the SNCF and RATP were to be subjected to specific measures on top of those aimed at the rest of the public sector, and at the working class in general.



### The 'Juppé Plan'

- A new tax (the RDS, *Réimbursement of the Dette Sociale*) of 0.5 per cent on all wages, breaking with the practice of exempting the low paid from direct taxes, to be introduced to clear an accumulated welfare deficit of 250 billion francs over the next thirteen years. The current welfare deficit was to be reduced from 64 billion francs in 1995 to seventeen billion francs in 1996 through a series of increased contributions and reduced benefits.
- Reduced spending on health, estimated to account for up to half of welfare 'losses', and increased charges on patients for public hospitals. Introduction of 'log book' medical records to restrict prescriptions and prevent patients from consulting specialists without the approval of a GP.
- Family benefit (paid to low income families with children) to be frozen in '96 and taxed from '97. Suspension of plan to introduce a home-care allowance for the elderly.
- Pension system for public sector workers to be brought into line with that of private sector workers, extending from 37.5 years to 40 years the length of service required for a full pension. Also abolition of the '*régimes particuliers*' for those in the public sector with 'difficult working conditions', under which SNCF or RATP train drivers can retire at 50 or other RATP, EDF-GDF, post office and coal workers at 55.
- Radical restructuring of social security administration, transferring health, pension and family allowance financing from joint control by the unions and employers into a form involving an enlarged role for the state, along with a planned constitutional amendment to allow the government to set a ceiling on welfare spending.
- At around the same time, the details of the '*contrat de plan*', a restructuring package for the SNCF, were revealed to include the regionalization of management, closure of 6,000 km of track and the sacking of 30,000-50,000 workers. Considered by many to be a prelude to privatization, a threat also hanging over the heads of workers in telecom, EDF-GDF etc.
- Also at the same time, the Treasury mooted the removal of a 20 per cent tax allowance given to all employees.

The nature of the Juppé package may explain why, as we shall see, the strike started in the SNCF and spread to the RATP first; above all, it explains why the movement was concentrated in the public sector. It also gives us some clues, but not the whole reason, as to why the unions adopted such a degree of militancy in opposition to the plan.

The package was presented to the National Assembly without any official consultation with the unions. In the eyes of the unions, this threatened to undermine the acceptance by the French bourgeoisie, one that had endured since 1936, of the role of the unions as *social partners*. Indeed the main employers' federation, the CNPF (*Conseil National du Patronat Français*), also resented the government's unilateral declaration of the 'Juppé plan' and the way it interfered with its partnership with the unions. Bipartite negotiations over major social issues such as unemployment had been established between the union confederations and the CNPF, which had been particularly concerned over recent years 'to maintain institutional channels for the expression and mobilisation of discontent...'<sup>47</sup>

On top of this the social security reforms explicitly sought to limit the power of the trade unions to manage the welfare system. The trade unions derived a great deal of benefit, in terms of entrenchment, perks and cushy jobs for functionaries, from this administrative function. In particular the usually moderate FO particularly resented measures which would have meant removing its nose from the trough of health insurance administration. Indeed, whilst the leader of the CFDT, Nicole Notat, greeted the proposals

with the statement 'the reforms proceed in a sensible manner', the leader of the FO, Marc Blondel called them 'a declaration of war to the FO' and called for a day of action on November 28th.

The unions needed to flex their muscles in order to demonstrate to the government that they could not be either disregarded or ousted from their spheres of influence. At this point it is worth remembering that for all the French bourgeoisie's attempts to impose austerity upon the working class there had never been a challenge to the unions' position as social partners. The Popular Front and Liberation governments had promoted the unions to a central position in the social organization of French capitalism, and such a position had remained unchallenged. Whilst such a relationship was being terminated in the UK by the new broom of Thatcher and in the US by Reagan, Mitterand was coming to power in France determined to work with the unions. His fourteen year rule had ensured that the relationship had been maintained despite the eventual rightwards shift in policy. It was only now, following the election of Chirac, that the partnership role of the unions was being explicitly questioned for the first time.

However, if the unions' position was being threatened by new developments in the French state, they also had to beware that their mediating role was not to be endangered by the rising discontent which had sometimes sought to bypass them in the past. Whilst not wanting to precipitate a general strike, the CGT and the FO certainly wanted to unleash a strong public sector strike. But in order to make clear the basis of their status in the social partnership, the unions had to ensure that they did not do anything to provoke or encourage the development of autonomous organizations which would have threatened their role as sole legitimate representatives of the workers in negotiations with the state. Thus they were not in the least antithetical to the development of *localized* autonomy in the form of strike assemblies. Indeed the contradictory experiences of the '86 rail strike and the '93 Air France strike had shown them how to maximize their influence with the state by minimizing interference at the grass roots level. However, the tendency to portray the struggle as one in which the unions simply ran fast to stay abreast of autonomy in order to get in a saving tackle on the strikers says more about the limits of an analysis which sees unions only as 'firemen for the bourgeoisie' than it does about a contradictory movement, like the one we are dealing with here, in which the union structures themselves as well as the workers were under threat.

### (iv) The Response

#### (a) The strike

The CGT called for a 'day of action' in support of civil servants for Friday November 24th. Perhaps sensing a determined groundswell of discontent, the unions one by one issued strike notices to coincide with the demonstration - the CGT for 8pm on the 23rd until 8am on the 25th, the FO for a five-day strike to connect to their day of action the following week, and the CFDT, demagogically, for an indefinite strike. Whatever, it was to be another three and a half weeks before most of the workers who struck that day returned to work.

Throughout the whole of France, half a million took part in huge demonstrations which were relatively larger in the provinces than in Paris, with tens of thousands marching in cities as far apart as Marseilles, Lyons and Toulouse in the South to Lilles in the North. In Paris, workers from throughout the public sector, from train drivers to teachers, were joined by workers from a wide variety of private sector companies. Nicole Notat, leader of the CFDT, was subjected to violent abuse by workers belonging to her union, forcing her to leave the demonstration. And it was clear that this was not a tokenistic affair like the usual one-day strikes. The public transport system in the Paris region, including the railway network, was completely paralysed.

Railway workers held general assemblies in the big rail depots, deciding to continue the strike and to hold further assemblies on a daily basis. Delegations of strikers, including union activists acting with the approval of their leaders, then played a crucial role in the



extension of the strike, first to the RATP, and then to the major postal sorting offices (usually located near rail depots) and other urban public transport systems. Some of the most active minorities engaged, without the democratic blessing of the assemblies, in exemplary acts of sabotage. Whereas in the 1986 strike movement the sabotage was more of the traditional variety (train couplings etc. with a hammer and spanner), that which occurred last December comprised hi-tech sabotage of the control boxes on the railway and of other computer systems and communication equipment including the bringing to a standstill of nuclear power stations (without danger of release of radioactive substances)<sup>48</sup> This level of rank-and-file activity was in marked contrast to the passive nature of much of the '68 general strike. The way the assemblies operated also marked an advance on those which the rail strike of '86 had produced. Not only were the divisions between different categories of railway worker transcended - drivers, ticket collectors and all the other grades discussing how to proceed together - but complete outsiders - other workers, the unemployed etc. - were also welcomed, transcending the divisions which cripple the class. However, we must not overstate the self-activity of the assemblies. In the first place, the assemblies varied in openness across different workplaces; and, second, the assemblies were ultimately unable to escape the control of the unions.

By the end of November, substantial numbers of electricity and gas workers, kindergarten and primary school teachers, and some secondary and tertiary lecturers had joined the strike. In those sectors where only a minority were on strike (post, telecom, electricity and gas), occupations of premises were used to increase the impact. In exemplary fashion electricity workers occupying distribution centres switched domestic consumers onto the cheaper night tariff during the day.

Despite some autonomous efforts to encourage the spread of the strike to the private sector, as a rule such an extension did not occur. There were exceptions though. In some parts of France, lorry drivers blocked roads in support of their unions' demand for retirement at the age of 55. At Caen, Renault workers from Blainville along with workers from Moulinex, Citroen, Credit Lyonnais, Credit Agricole and Kodak struck in order to join the regular demonstrations. In Clermont-Ferrand thousands of Michelin workers did the same, and in Lorraine miners went on strike for higher wages and fought running battles with the police. But the only place where substantial numbers of private sector workers broke down the political barrier separating the two sectors was in Rouen where a delegation of 800 strikers went to the Renault Cleon plant to encourage them to strike and join them in blockading roads and the like.

#### (b) The demonstrations

Whilst there was *no general strike*, the winter crisis amounted to *more than simply a public sector strike*. Local government buildings were occupied, the channel tunnel was blocked, runways were invaded, and motorway toll booths were requisitioned to raise strike funds. But perhaps the most notable feature of the movement was the series of demonstrations which brought hundreds of thousands of

people out onto the streets: the 'Juppéthons' of November 24th and 28th, December 5th and 7th, culminating in the huge rallies on the 12th and 16th of December. Juppé had promised to resign if two million people took to the streets, thereby setting a target for the movement. Other public sector workers including civil servants, dockers, airport workers and hospital workers, as well as delegations from the private sector, struck on the days of the demonstrations, and they continued to grow in size. By the first week of December, more than a million were taking part in the demonstrations. And by the second week the magic number of two million had been reached.

The demonstrations were both massive and carnivalesque. Proletarians mixed and had fun regardless of professional or sectional differences, unlike on the funeral marches so typical of normal political demonstrations, producing a tangible feeling that social relations were being transformed through transforming the psychogeography of the street. But although there were clashes with the cops after demonstrations in Paris, Montpellier and Nantes on December 5th, the marches themselves did not erupt into the kind of confrontations which occurred regularly in the movement of the



previous year. In large part this may have been due to the fact that the demonstrations were too big for the cops to attack so the CRS had to be kept on a tight leash.<sup>49</sup> Rather than risk raising the stakes it was left up to union stewards (including 'revolutionary' ones from the CNT) to keep the peace. Moreover, without an initial spark provided by friction with the cops, the step to riot and direct appropriation is, psychologically, a huge one for most people.

It has to be recognized, however, that the movement did not attract the *casseurs* who might have transcended the limited dialogue of the workers' movement in favour of the universal language (spoken by worker and non-worker alike the world over) of the proletarian riot. The demonstrations remained peaceful, within certain boundaries and limited in impact. Only in Montpellier and Nantes, the cities where the clashes occurred, did the kids from the *banlieue* join in with the social upheaval. In the main, the *banlieue* remained quiet.

Some 6,800 acts of urban violence had occurred in 1995 according to the French intelligence services, causing the junior minister for urban affairs to denounce what he called an *intifada à la Française*.<sup>50</sup> Riots had occurred throughout the year in the suburbs of Paris and elsewhere. But it seems as if the gangs were not attracted to the movement. Perhaps it was because they were not being directly attacked as they had been in '94. Or perhaps because from their perspective, that of the marginalized, the government's labelling of the main protagonists as 'privileged' rang true. Or could it be that the attraction towards a separatist ideology had increased? In May *beurs* and Jewish kids in a Parisian suburb had fought the cops together after the latter had issued racist statements attacking both groups. But since then there had been a wave of terrorist bombings related to the civil war in Algeria and 'Islamic fundamentalism' had become a national obsession, labelling anyone without a white face as a potential terrorist suspect. The French



media had celebrated the public execution on September 29th of 'terrorist suspect' Khaled Kelkal, an unemployed 24 year-old of Algerian origin from Vaulx-en-Velin, a suburb of Lyons. TV pictures showed a cop kicking the corpse, and reactions to the footage revealed deep divisions. Whilst many felt relief that an enemy within had been eliminated, Vaulx-en-Velin exploded at yet another state atrocity.

#### (v) Prospect of European Escalation

The movement in France was also beginning to hear echoes of itself beyond its national boundaries. Solidarity rallies were held in Rome and Athens. In Berlin on December 14th a demonstration in solidarity with 'foreigners' inside Germany turned into a demonstration of solidarity with the struggle of those in France. But the most significant developments occurred in Belgium where, after a month long strike by Alcatel employees against redundancies, and following a demonstration of students and teachers in Liege which ended in a violent confrontation with the cops, a demonstration was called by the unions for December 13th. Sixty thousand or so marched in Brussels against spending cuts. The railway workers of the SNCB, who had been on strike for three days, along with Sabena employees, whose strike had disrupted air traffic, were at the forefront.

Any possibilities of transcending national divisions in a unified struggle against the formation of a 'bankers' Europe' were stillborn, however. Negotiations between the government and the unions in France had begun to seek a settlement. Within two days of the demonstration in Belgium, strike assemblies in France were discussing a faxed circular from the CGT calling for an end to the strike.

#### (vi) The Settlement

Through paralysing circulation, the strike was beginning to have a major impact upon the French economy.<sup>51</sup> Shortages of raw materials began to hit the production of surplus-value whilst a lack of customers in the cities hit at its realization. All in all, the strike was estimated to have cost French capital up to eight billion francs

strike, using De Gaulle's half million strong demonstration in May '68 as its model, ended in farce, mobilizing only a couple of hundred people. And attempts to form 'transport users' committees' barely got off the ground. Clearly the strikers enjoyed overwhelming, if still overwhelmingly passive, support. So threats to call a referendum or general election to resolve the crisis also had to be forgotten quickly.

Unable to face down such a strong and unified movement on December 5th, the government offered to open negotiations with the unions, offering a few paltry concessions with no mention of the planned changes to pensions. This offer in itself was taken by the CFDT as reason enough to call off the strikes, indicating the extent to which the priority of all the unions was to regain their invite to the bargaining table. But the CGT and FO dismissed the offer as a non-response and vowed to continue the strike until the welfare reform plan was withdrawn. However, the opening of negotiations signalled that the movement's unwillingness to challenge the unions' overall control would fatally undermine its ability to achieve its demands. On November 28th, the government had declared that 'the welfare reforms are a single package', and the movement had united around the twin demands of scrapping the package *as a whole* and sacking the man responsible. But in the negotiations the government's strategy became one of selective appeasement in order to split the movement. Concessions had already been made to the student movement in order to split it from the main body of struggle, and the government now proceeded to separate and isolate the different aspects of the package in order to deal with each one separately over a longer period.

On December 10th the climb down was announced. The *contrat de plan* for the SNCF would be put on ice and the proposal to increase the number of years public sector employees would have to work for their pensions dropped. The *régimes particulier* would remain. Promises were made to protect the public services from the deregulation demanded by the EU. Wage negotiations with the miners were to be reopened. Assurances had been given to the FO concerning their position regarding social security reform. A 'social summit' between the government and union leaders was announced for 22nd December.



in lost production. But the government was unable to break the movement by force. Efforts to run a fleet of scab buses for Parisian commuters had to be abandoned due to the paralysis of the traffic system. The RPR's attempt to organize a demonstration against the

The dissatisfaction of the rank-and-file with these concessions was evident when two million demonstrated on December 12th. But the fax from the CGT on December 15th marked the beginning of the end. It was greeted with anger by many strikers including CGT



branch officials who were initially convinced it was a forgery. General assemblies at the Gare du Nord in Paris, the South West Paris rail depot, in Lyons, Rouen and elsewhere initially voted to continue the strike, unhappy that the demands of the movement as a whole had not been met. But no alternative to union control had been established. There was no national co-ordination to organize the continuation of the strike and negotiate a better deal. Anyway, the seeds of division had been sown with the withdrawal of those aspects of the Juppé plan which had particularly riled the most combative sectors in the struggle, those who had been on all-out strike. The assemblies of striking railway workers began to exclude the 'outsiders' who had previously been made welcome. Votes for a return to work were carried. Within three days, and despite the fact that the demonstrations on December 16th were still huge, the rail strike was practically over. The return to work followed, gradually, elsewhere. Bar a few notable exceptions, the movement had ended.<sup>52</sup>

The union leaderships had won major concessions from the government. Railway workers and other workers in the public sector had ensured that the aspects of the package which had made them most angry had been scrapped. But those measures which had figured in the immediate deficit-reduction timetable remained. The RDS, the increase in hospital fees, health spending caps, the freeze on family allowances - all of these measures which would together reduce the social security deficit by 43 billion francs - remained intact. These were the measures which had united the demonstrators, measures which affected public and private sector worker alike. But by ending the strikes the government had managed to preserve these measures, described by *The Economist* as 'the essentials'.<sup>53</sup>

#### (vii) Reflections

Only idiots complain about sell outs. We can criticize unions and parties, recognize their role of recuperation and mediation, but our criticisms must begin with and develop from within the movement of the working class itself. The question is why the movement was unable to go further. If it could not go all the way, and *had* to settle for crumbs, then could it still not have achieved more? What was missing was some kind of *co-ordinated* autonomous control over the movement. Perhaps if the local examples of autonomy had co-ordinated nationally... But this would have been a big step. The unions were wary of provoking co-ordinations, and thus avoided confronting the strike assemblies, even going so far as to praise their autonomous activities. And those railway workers who wanted to trigger an all-out strike did not see the need for autonomous organization; quite the opposite, they knew that if they tried to revive something like the co-ordinations they risked confrontation with the unions and the end to the spirit of unity that seemed to be of paramount importance in persuading hesitating workmates. Besides which, their strike of '86, for all its advances in self-organization, and perhaps in part because of them, had ended in harsh defeat.

Perhaps this is the wrong way to look at the question. There was no autonomous *organization* because there was no clash between the strikers and the unions to give rise to it until it was too late - the *forms* of autonomy arise out of circumstances which make them necessary. The CGT and the FO roundly condemned the 'Juppé plan' and encouraged an all-out strike in the public sector. The problem then is that the movement was unable to extend itself beyond a public sector strike on the one hand and limited demonstrations on the other. Or to put it another way, the fundamental problem was that the class remained divided between those prepared to throw themselves into the struggle and those who supported it passively.

In strictly *formal* terms the movement was simply a trade union affair. It cannot be denied that the unions remained in charge, permitting and even encouraging a certain level of autonomous activity. But it would be an easy mistake to look at these events from the sort of perspective which looks only for particular organizational

forms, seeing in the unions only monolithic structures of domination. The 'new unionism' which tolerated autonomy should be seen as mediating a real expression of antagonistic subjectivity. Like that of the state, the mediating and recuperating role of the union is made and remade through struggle - crystallizations of previous waves of struggle liquefied by new antagonisms. The movement can be criticized for not developing the requisite organizational forms in order for it to go further. But it is also necessary to identify the more, positive aspects of the struggle in the hope that - next time - they may develop the forms adequate for the realization of their full potential. The *Intakes* articles we reproduce in this issue of *Aufheben* draw out some of those aspects.

#### Epilogue: France Risks New Unrest

The most important thing about the movement of November and December 1995 must be how the working class of France follows it up. The only thing that is certain is that it will come under attack again. The pressures which led to the Juppé plan remain. The convergence criteria for Maastricht still need to be met.

In May '96 a special cabinet meeting was held where ministers were ordered to make savings of £7-8 billion over eighteen months. Chirac had demanded 'draconian' cuts, insisting that a change of mentality on public spending had to be made either voluntarily or by force. A government official announced that 'No figure has been fixed yet on eventual savings, but the effort needed to meet targets will mean cuts on a scale never seen before'.<sup>54</sup>

It is because more battles will be fought that it is necessary for the limits of the winter movement to be superseded. There is a need for critique. The articles we reproduce here are attempts at such a critique by people who were participants. Without necessarily agreeing with every point in them we recognize their importance. The movement towards communism depends upon critical reflection and practical supersession. It is to be hoped that the inclusion of these articles may hasten the day in which the struggles of the French working class become as one with our own.

September 1996

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The SWP is the largest (far-)leftist organization in the UK; the ICC is (probably) the largest left-communist organization in the world (not saying much!). That theoretically the ICC puristly upholds 'communist positions' while the SWP opportunistically flits between different 'counter-revolutionary' positions is of course a difference between the organizations. What is interesting with regards the French events is their similarity. The SWP thinks all the movement lacked was the 'right leadership' which was not given by the PCF, the unions or French Trot groups. The ICC on the other hand sees the working class as completely hoodwinked by these 'cunning factions of the bourgeoisie'. But, as Leninists, they both agree that they somehow possess what the working class lacks - the correct leadership or consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> See 'EMUs in the class war' in *Aufheben* I.

<sup>3</sup> From 'France after the strikes', in *Frontline* (Australian activist newspaper), posted on the internet by Harry Cleaver for *Accion Zapatista de Austin*.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Dr Kohl's prescription for trouble', in *The Guardian*, 1st August 1996.

<sup>5</sup> See 'A New Hot Autumn: The struggle against the Italian government and the official trade unions is the struggle against the Europe of the bosses', *London Notes*, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> One account of the COBAS is Gregor Gall, 'The emergence of a rank and file movement: the *Comitati di Base* in the Italian workers' movement', in *Capital & Class* 55 (spring 1995). A more satisfactory account, but earlier and therefore more about their origin, is David Brown (1988) *The COBAS: Italy 1986-88: A new rank and file movement* (Echanges et Mouvement).

In considering the extent to which bourgeois anti-fascism played a central role in shaping post-war France, the period of the Popular Front government should not be forgotten. Many enduring labour protection laws, such as the 40 hour week and significant nationalizations (*Banque de France*, war industries, railways etc.) were enacted in June 1936 in response to a wave of strikes and factory occupations involving two million workers. An account of internationalist



resistance to fascism is contained in the pamphlet 'Internationalists in France during the Second World War' by Pierre Lannet.

<sup>8</sup> The reference to a fordist economy requires an explanation because of a later reference to the neo-fordist labour process further on in the article. By fordist economy we mean Fordism, a mode of capital accumulation based on the mass production and mass consumption of consumer durables. The establishment of the fordist labour process was its necessary prerequisite. As a valorization process extracting relative surplus-value it allowed for rising profits to occur alongside expanded consumption for the working class. By using the assembly line to dictate the pace of work to a workforce which had already been broken down into deskilled component parts by Taylorism, the fordist labour process was, up to certain limits, able to impose progressive increases in productivity. See previous issues of *Aufheben* (in particular 'EMUs In The Class War' in no. 1 but also the review article in no. 2 and 'Auto-Struggles' in no. 3) for our use of the concept of Fordism and for our criticisms of the regulation school which developed them.

<sup>9</sup> Interrupted only by strike waves in 1953 and 1963.

<sup>10</sup> Readers unfamiliar with the events are encouraged to seek out original sources. Fortunately there are a number of decent pamphlets available in English: R. Grégoire & F. Perlman (1969) *Worker-Student Action Committees: France May '68* (Detroit: Black & Red), R. Vienét (1968) *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (New York: Autonomedia / London: Rebel Press), and the eye-witness account produced by Solidarity (1968) *Paris: May 1968* (London: Dark Star/Rebel Press).

<sup>11</sup> This analysis obviously owes a debt to that of the Situationist International.

<sup>12</sup> It would be inaccurate to say that the movement seized control over the means of production of ideas *per se* because the mass media was able to continue its function of counter-revolutionary propaganda unthreatened by the movement. This criticism, amongst others, is made in the text by Grégoire & Perlman, referred to above (note 10), an account notable for its willingness to engage in self-criticism.

<sup>13</sup> As with all Keynesian programmes which involve concessions, these measures are ambiguous in that they necessarily involve the rationalization of capitalist production and the struggles that result from this. For example, most of these nationalizations were undertaken in order to perform badly-needed restructuring in these sectors; and the implementation of the 39 hour week involved the suppression of certain benefits in working time.

<sup>14</sup> Whilst the government was forced to back-track on certain measures, it did not retreat on all of them. Moreover it did not opt for the Thatcherite model but rather pursued policies which were more consistent with Gaullism. No attempt was made to tear up the social consensus - the unions were kept on board. This point is extremely important because it is only now that the French bourgeoisie are considering emulating their Anglo-Saxon counterparts.

<sup>15</sup> The technological elimination of aspects of the labour process, making redundant whole sections of semi-skilled workers, was combined with an organizational restructuring of the remainder. The fordist labour process had individualized its component workers at distinct work stations connected by the assembly line. The neo-fordist labour process retained the assembly line in order to dictate the pace of work but brought workers back together in groups. By breaking with some of the accumulated rigidities of Taylorism, allowing the groups themselves to organize how to meet the demands imposed by the line, a greater intensity of labour was made possible than under the previous organization as more of the time imbalances between distinct tasks could be eliminated. But the neo-fordist assembly line was not just a technical innovation aimed at quantitative goals. Whilst not completely successful, neo-fordist experiments were deliberately designed to reduce the antagonism between capital and labour which had made the car factories one of the central battlegrounds of the revolt of the 'mass worker'. By taking on board some of the lessons which industrial sociology had distilled from its analysis of the class struggle, the experience of a real increase in the rate of exploitation could henceforth be made less inhuman. The introduction of group co-operation not only made the experience of assembly line work less atomizing, in itself reducing the tendency for conflict, but also, by getting the group to internalize and co-operate around the dictates of management, it served to create a new aspect of capitalist control, that of the work group over the potentially unruly individual. See Benjamin Coriat 'The restructuring of the assembly line: A new economy of time and control', in *Capital and Class* 11 (summer 1980).

<sup>16</sup> In response to the announcement of several thousand redundancies, workers struck and occupied the factory. Immigrant workers, who comprised 90 per cent of the workforce in some factories, were attacked by scabs and foremen as the struggle against restructuring took place along 'racial' lines. See Sol Picciotto, 'The battles at Talbot-Poissy: Workers' divisions and capital restructuring', in *Capital and Class* 23 (summer 1984). These incidents occurred after a series of conflicts in Citroën factories during which immigrant workers clashed with CGT and CFDT trades unionists.

<sup>17</sup> Although the downward trend in the incidence of strike activity cannot be disputed, exact figures should be viewed with caution. On the one hand they demonstrate the unions' inability to stage symbolic actions as well as a reluctance of workers to take meaningful ones, and on the other the statistics rarely take

account of the number of rank and file conflicts at factory level which neither management nor unions have any interest in publicizing.

<sup>18</sup> The PS and PCF agreed a 'Common Programme' of the left in 1972 in a bid to break the control of the right-wing over parliament. The PCF was still the biggest political party in 1956 but had been in continual decline in opposition since 1947, being gradually overtaken by the PS. Although the PCF renounced the agreement in 1977, a deal was struck between the leaders of the parties for the 1981 elections. Mitterand won the second round, dissolved the National Assembly and called for elections, and then formed a coalition government in which the PS were the majority. Four ministerial positions were reserved for the PCF including that of Employment Minister, which meant that the CGT came to adopt a less than militant approach in industrial disputes, continually emphasizing the need for negotiations (see the article on the dispute at Talbot-Poissy referred to earlier, note 16) and sabotaging a wildcat strike on the railways in 1984. The PCF withdrew from the government in 1984 following the replacement of 'left-wing' Prime Minister Mauroy with one from the right of the Socialist Party, Laurent Fabius.

<sup>19</sup> 'When the word *beur* was made fashionable by the media, it was in order to grasp a reality that was escaping them: some individuals were presenting the interesting characteristic of not really having an identity. They didn't really feel French, nor really Algerian or Moroccan etc. Without a homeland, full of energy, capable of criticizing each civilization with the values of the other, of rejecting Islamic obscurantism as much as the inhumanity of the modern West: here were people who risked being absolutely un-integratable.' ('Suburbs on fire - The centre in the middle', in *Mordicus* 4, April-May 1991).

<sup>20</sup> A clear opposition between white liberals and black/Arab militants would be a gross oversimplification - from the start the *beurs* were not a homogeneous grouping. Following the success of the march against racism, there was a boom in 'beur culture' which principally benefited a new cultural elite, the 'bourgeoisie', who gained access to the corridors of ministerial power and the circles of the 'caviar left'. Conferences were organized, building on many localized working class initiatives, with a view to gaining representative legitimacy in the eyes of the state, and the movement was split between those seeking to climb the social ladder and those that recognized that, even if this became a real possibility for everyone, it was one which could only ever be realized by an elite few. Since then many blacks and Arabs have joined the political classes, but many have been left as before with nothing to lose by adopting a lifestyle of 'criminality' (*Immaterial Labour, Mass Intellectuality, New Constitution, Post-Fordism and all that*, Red Notes, July 1994).

<sup>21</sup> For a full account of the movement see *France goes off the Rails* (BM Blob and BM Combustion, London, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> See the leaflets reprinted in *France goes off the Rails*.

<sup>23</sup> Strike committees had also emerged in strikes on the railways in 1978, 1979, 1981 and 1984.

<sup>24</sup> For example Chausson (February-March '88), SNEMCA (spring '88), nurses (March '88 - January '89), and a (relatively) rare strike in the private sector, Peugeot (autumn '89). See *Echanges et Mouvement* 66/67 (January-June '91).

<sup>25</sup> *Echanges et Mouvement* 65 (July-December '90).

<sup>26</sup> *Echanges et Mouvement* 66/67 (January-June '91). Regarding the question of recuperation, a critique of the distinctive style of rap music which emerged in France in the 1980s as part of the rejection of the left's patronizing 'assimilation strategy' would be valuable. The fact that the lyrics are not in English imposes restrictions on the size of the market and precludes the emergence of mega-rich 'gangsta-stars' as happened in the US, but nevertheless must lead to the development of hierarchy within the *beurs* movement as much as it unites it around an antagonistic social identity. As for the film 'La Haine', based around the desire of three young *banlieue* residents (one black, one Jewish, and one Arab) to avenge the murder of a mate by a cop, and containing real footage from a riot in a Parisian suburb, to what extent does the spectacularization of the struggle hinder its real development? It is worth noting that there were riots in Noisy le Grand, Le Havre and Rouen during the first fortnight of the film's release, but it is arguable whether these were in any way related to the film or whether they would have happened anyway. The film does not seem to have a particularly pacifying effect, however. In the UK when crowds emerging from a screening in Brixton last year found a riot in full swing following a Brian Douglass memorial march (killed by cops wielding the new US-style batons) many were not merely content to have consumed the representation of revolt but had been fuelled to seek out the real thing.

<sup>27</sup> See 'Indians of the suburbs' in *Mordicus* 4 for an analysis of Muslim recuperation of the '91 riots.

<sup>28</sup> See 'The co-ordinating committees in France: A new form of organisation in the class struggle' in *Echanges et Mouvement* 72/73 (January-February '93).

<sup>29</sup> The elimination of stock inventories in favour of parts being delivered 'just-in-time', and extending this principle throughout the factory, served to increase the discipline imposed by the requirements of the production process upon each work group and thus of this alienated collectivity on individual workers (see note 15). The 'just-in-time' disciplinary regime is itself highly dependent upon a well disciplined workforce - a system which works through the establishment of its own preconditions - and thus highly vulnerable when disruptions do occur.



Having served to reduce the incidence of strikes these developments in the capitalist labour process have also served to increase their potential impact. An interesting analysis of this vulnerability, prompted by a dispute with similarities to the one being considered here, the Spanish lorry drivers dispute of 1990, was included in the June '91 edition of the Barcelona based magazine *Etcetera*, and translated as 'Dispersed Fordism and a New Organisation of Labour' in *Here & Now* 13.

Unlike sterling, the franc had been able to withstand the kind of intense speculative pressure which led in Britain's case to Black Wednesday and the exit of the pound from the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). According to the socialist government's figures, growth was at 1.8 - 2 per cent p.a. (greater than that of all its competitors except for Japan), inflation down to 2.4 per cent, and the public spending deficit down to 2.7 per cent of GDP. The franc had been stable against the Deutschmark since 1987, income tax was at its lowest for 25 years, and the number of strikes down to a post-war record low. See *The Economist*, 21st November 1992.

The apparent strength of the French economy (see previous note) had been bolstered by the economic boom that had followed German unification. The failure to stem the rise in eastern German wages towards levels paid to western German workers, together with the generous rates of conversion of Ostmarks into Deutschmarks, had created an inflationary surge in consumer demand in Germany that French industry had been well placed to meet. However, the failure to both stem the levelling up of eastern German wages and make the western German working class pay directly the full costs of unification had meant that the Bundesbank, as the last line of defence against inflation and the erosion of profitability, had little option but to pursue a tight monetary policy. The Bundesbank steadfastly maintained high German interest rates even at the cost of triggering the exchange rate crisis that wrecked the ERM on what became known as Black Wednesday. By late 1992, this counter-inflationary policy had begun to take its full effect with a sharp slow down in the German economy. Having weathered the storm on the exchange rate markets, with the franc remaining firmly tied to the Deutschmark in the ERM, France found itself not only at a significant competitive disadvantage with regard to those countries such as the UK, Spain and Italy who had devalued following Black Wednesday, but also tied to a stagnating German economy. As a result, the French economy went into reverse: having grown by nearly two per cent in 1992 it shrank by over one per cent in the first quarter of 1993 alone.

A chronology of events and analysis is contained in the winter 1993 edition of *Mordicus*. A translation into English has been produced by 56a Infoshop, London.

The plethora of struggles which followed the Air France strike, including many wildcat strikes, is catalogued in *Collective Action Notes* 3/4.

The significance of this demonstration is explored in 'Circuit breakers broken' by Echanges et Mouvement, in *Nous Sommes Tous Des Casseurs* (see note 37 below).

The CIP was, like many divisive social security reforms in the UK, aimed specifically at those under 25 years old. It applied to school leavers still unemployed after six months, who would receive vocational training in return for this reduced wage, and to those holding a *baccalauréat* and two years further education starting their first job.

*The Economist*, 12th March 1994.

It is impossible to do justice to this movement in the few lines which an introduction to a subsequent movement allows. It is therefore strongly recommended that readers try to get hold of *Nous Sommes Tous Des Casseurs*. This pamphlet includes various translations which provide a detailed account and analysis of the movement and deserves a wider circulation than it has so far received. It should be available from AK Press. The movement is also dealt with in *Immaterial Labour, Mass Intellectuality, New Constitution, Post-Fordism and all that*, Red Notes, July 1994. This pamphlet is nigh impossible to get hold of as well. Readers could try writing to Red Notes.

Since '68 the state has made significant efforts to evacuate proletarian social life from the centre of Paris, filling it with Culture. For example, the Pompidou Centre was built on one of the few areas of central Paris in which the working class could afford to live. To be sure, the state has had a degree of success in this strategy - social movements have of late failed to focus themselves in the heart of the capital, with the resultant feeling that the movements have somehow been less significant for it. But when unruly proletarians do manage to reconquer the territory from which they have been excluded, as in the case of this movement, the treasures to be recovered by looting are all the richer for it.

Despite a network of student organisations supposedly putting a coherent case ... the past few days have shown that the movement, dominated by high schools and polytechnics, is headless, spontaneous, decentralized and ready to explode.' *The Guardian*, 31st March 1994.

Press photographs of looters found their way onto notice boards in police stations throughout Paris. See *The Independent*, 6th April 1994, for more on this subject.

It is worth remembering that the general strike in May '68 came out of a day of protest at the brutality of the cops' assault on the barricades of the 'student movement'.

<sup>42</sup> See *Collective Action Notes* for a chronology of struggles in France. This makes quite clear the contrast in the level of strike activity between France and the UK.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *The Economist*, 14th October 1995.

<sup>44</sup> There had been a gradual *rapprochement* between the unions which culminated in 1995 with an end to the internecine conflicts which had broken out following the end of the 'Union of the Left' in 1977. The collapse of Stalinism reduced the significance of the CGT's attachment to the PCF and raised questions about the FO's *raison d'être*, whilst the CFDT had increasingly distanced itself from the PS since Mitterand's 1988 re-election. The CGT's general secretary received a warm welcome at the CFDT's conference in March, whilst his symbolic handshake with Marc Blondel of the FO was a first since the split in 1947. But the main factor was a greater desire for unity at rank-and-file level in response to the evident weakness of each union. A notable feature of the days of action in November and December 1995 was that workers from all the unions (as well as those from none at all, of course) participated regardless of which union had organized it.

<sup>45</sup> The universities in Paris are funded more generously than those in the provinces, where the student movement, like the subsequent workers' movement, was more impressive in relative scale.

<sup>46</sup> Although the Liberation government introduced a comprehensive system of social protection, it emerged as a far from universal system but one which is a strongly particularistic tangle of administrative units. Each of the general, specific, basic and supplementary schemes that make up the social security system is separately administered by a council representing both unions and employers. Each has responsibility for collecting contributions and paying out benefits. Perhaps the most important aspect from the present point of view is that this financing is done on a current-funding or pay-as-you-go basis - each year's receipts from workers' contributions go out immediately in payments to the retired, ill, or injured. This means that, unlike in the UK where social security is funded out of general taxation, imbalances are immediately visible. Thus the talk of 'bankruptcy' in France compared with the message of an 'unsustainable burden' in the UK. However the crisis in the welfare budget manifests itself, the state needs a degree of control in order to impose restructuring.

<sup>47</sup> In Steve Jefferys, 'France 1995: The backward march of labour halted?', in *Capital & Class* 59 (summer 1996).

<sup>48</sup> This seems to represent an important breakthrough, not only in its effectiveness, but also in bringing beautifully on to the social terrain what has previously been a very individualized form of resistance (i.e. the hacker).

<sup>49</sup> The miners in the Lorraine basin were attacked by the cops, however. After the cops tear-gassed a peaceful rally and beat up 30 strikers at Houillères, the miners kidnapped the local mayor and held him down a mine shaft for thirteen hours. The next day 2,000 miners were met by 1,000 cops and further running battles ensued. In Merlebach on December 8th, 4,000 miners with helmets, protective eye-glasses, gas masks, armed with pick-axes, steel cable, explosive *pétards* and molotovs fought for a day and a half continuously with the CRS, successfully burning down a building. State violence was also targeted at those strikes which persisted after the majority had returned to work, as we shall see below.

<sup>50</sup> *The Economist*, 27th January 1996.

<sup>51</sup> It has been pointed out, however, that much of the circulation process of capital occurs electronically. Telecom strikers apparently identified the possibility of paralysing this aspect of the process as well, but it did not happen in this strike, partly due to kind of respectful taboo amongst telecom employees, partly due to a whole range of repressive disciplinary measures aimed precisely at interference with the means of electronic communication.

<sup>52</sup> Strikes continued over local demands in the Marseilles transport authority and Caen post office. Despite the use of the CRS to evict strikers from occupied premises and escort scabs, resulting in violent clashes, these strikes were successful.

<sup>53</sup> 'Tactical retreat: Costing Juppé's concessions', *The Economist*, 16th December 1995.

<sup>54</sup> 'France risks new unrest', *The Guardian*, 3rd May 1996.





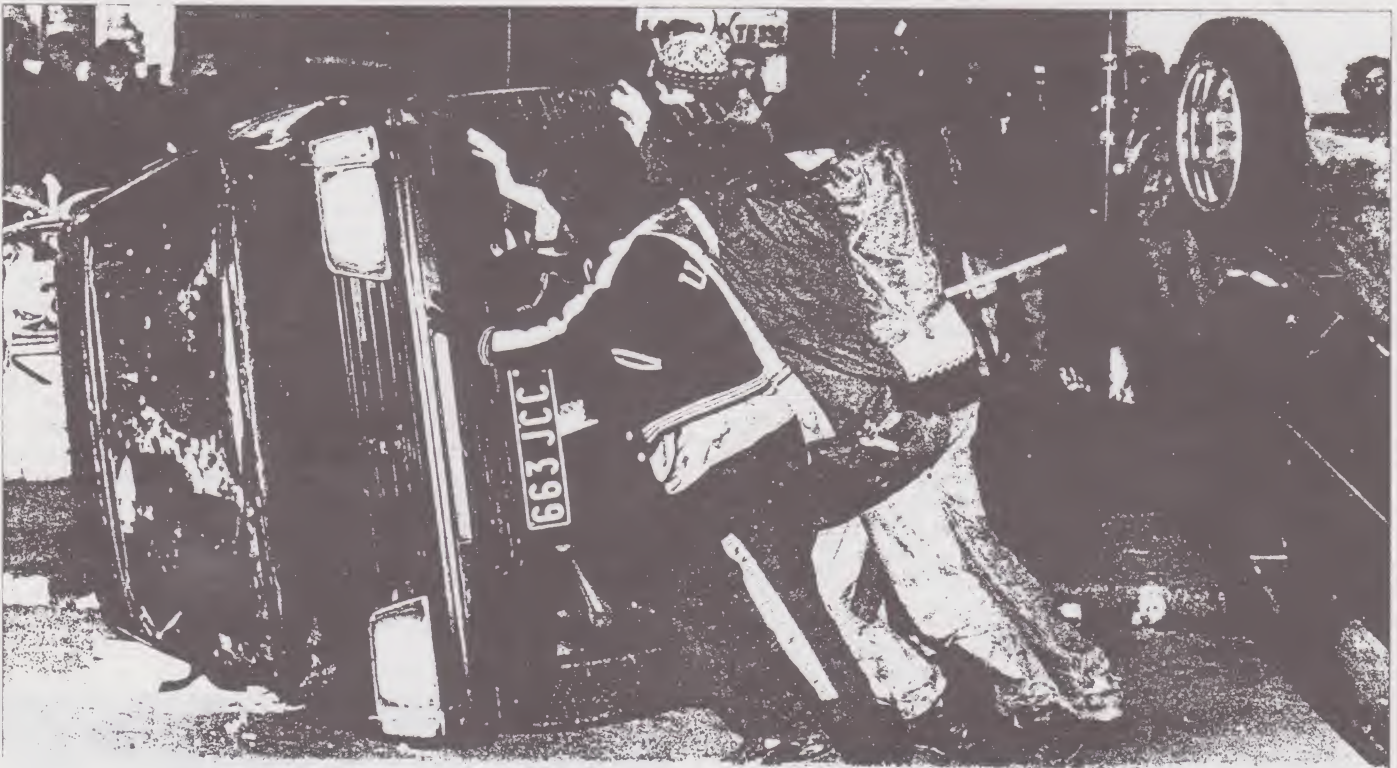
## Intakes:

# 'Together we can invent a future'<sup>1</sup>

Documents from the movement of winter '95

Our *Intakes* section in this issue of *Aufheben* comprises a selection of documents produced in France around the time of the movement of winter '95. The first six pieces below were mainly produced as leaflets, in December last year. We have chosen these from the dozens of leaflets we came across on the basis of the insights they offer into how those involved understood the movement at the time. Some, such as 'Now or Never' convey the overall feel of the movement; others are more critical and analytical - in particular 'Beware, One Striking Train may Conceal Another'. Finally, 'Last (but not least) Exit to the Strike', is a lively illustration of the relationship between workers and bosses towards the end of the rail strike.

The final three pieces were articles written around January 1996, at the end of the strike movement. The first, 'The Strike and After', was written by a printer-cum-proofreader in Paris involved in the strike in his workplace. The article describes some of the radical tendencies of the movement, but suggests that as a whole the movement was limited by the failure to grasp the function of work and the role of the state. The writer describes the new forms of insubordination against state power which developed, and points to the need to clarify a critique of the unions. The second article, 'France End of 1995: Anger and Huge Strikes', was written by 'M' in Athens, for a foreign readership. The piece analyses the defensive nature of the strike movement. Unlike the 'offensive' of 1968, here was a movement defending prior gains in the face of the march of economic liberalization. The final article, 'On the Eve of Battle', was written by a train driver in the Paris region. The article is a vivid account of the experiences of solidarity and creativity within the movement, and of the conflicts both between the movement and its opponents and among different participants within the movement - particularly trade union players.



### ONE MORE EFFORT!

The government which came to office in May promised change and to fight against social fracture. Finally, we have had the police state and the awakening of social antagonism by the mass of waged and casual workers and the unemployed.

From the foundation of the *Vigipirate* (government plan to prevent terrorism), to the social security reform plans, only three months have passed. Three months during which the state, after having pursued the 'Islamists', is now attacking public sector

workers. The objective is to set up one section of the population as the enemy within.

The anti-terrorism plans are designed to reassure people by pointing a finger at anyone who looks like an immigrant. With the Juppé reforms it is civil servants who are denounced as the privileged who want to keep hold of their privileges.



Between the two, there are a mass of citizens held hostage in a no-man's land in which the silence only seems like proof of a tacit acceptance of the current political situation.

In the case of the anti-terrorism plan, this device has worked rather well: voices have barely been raised, there has been little resistance to the increase in controls, arrests, expulsions the cities and outlying areas. Only certain suburbs have been the site of clashes in a situation already tense for several years. But as the young people in the cities have been well aware, far from hunting down terrorists, the anti-terrorist measures are aimed primarily at the domestication of new dangerous classes stuck in certain districts and on the edge of the big cities. *Vigipirate* is the policing aspect of the crisis which is being imposed on unstable populations

The social security reform plan is participating in the same politics of generalized policing for those who cannot afford the medicine of wealth: photos on social security cards, obligatory health

books, advance payment for health care for 'foreigners'. But above all the attack on 'social gains' and corporatism is a question of breaking down the last bastions which are protected from the crisis and reaching the final stage of the long road of neo-liberal enterprise of the last fifteen years. The restructuring of the process of production must not remain at the doors of the public sector. In order to reach it, the Chirac state is ready for anything. Including mobilizing the army and giving rise to the creation of so-called passenger committees.

The policing, the firm and scornful 'no' confronting the strikers are the sign of the reinforcing of the state's authority which appeals to a sense of history to eradicate what remains for us of revolt. So comrades, one more time, it's now or never!

Contact: La Bonne Descente, Paris

## NOW OR NEVER!

The growing social movement gives us, for the first time for ages, the opportunity to create our own history. Without opposing some reform or other, the students are rebelling against misery, against the empty hole of the future, against the society which has dug this hole. Led at first by unions scared of losing their breaks, hundreds and thousands of workers have today thrown themselves into a strike which goes beyond opposition to the Juppé plan. When the demands multiply, when the transport workers remain mobilized, when the postal workers go on strike, when the Air France workers are on the runways again, we can feel that the submission to sacrifice, after twenty years of fighting the crisis, is finally in the process of being broken... When the metro workers' strike means that the *Vigipirate* plan is out of the question... When, as in Marseilles, the unemployed lead the front of the demo... When, as in Jussieu, the 'youth from the suburbs' and students join to defend themselves against the cops... When students and permanent and casual workers meet on demos and in assemblies... When, as in Toulouse, the students come to help

strikers stop the buses... When the categories which imprison us disappear... That's when a *generalized social revolt* takes shape against the capitalist order.

On the other side, the Prime Sinister and his Notat, the boss of the professional left, all chant the usual blackmail to us: 'We must adapt to survive in the World Market'.

In the face of a government which is playing all their cards, everyone senses that, behind today's struggle, is the risk of serious defeat, followed by social regression *for everyone*.

Will the Law of Economics condemn us to this? Let's smash the laws! So that we can struggle, speak to each other, and imagine other ways of living together.

We must take back the time that wage slavery has stolen from us.

Long live the GENERAL STRIKE!

A country which is entirely on strike is a new world shaping itself!

## THE MOMENT HAS COME... IF IT ESCAPES US WE WON'T FIND IT AGAIN FOR A LONG TIME.

anonymous poster on the walls of Toulon, 23 March 1789

Behind the specific demands there is often a general feeling of dissatisfaction, of having had enough. The profound misery of the majority of the population derives from not being able to express the fact of their isolation.

Everyone who finds themselves stuck in their roles as unemployed, casual workers... are today in the position many will find themselves in tomorrow.

These past few days we have been demonstrating with the strikers.

We are convinced that the present turmoil is asking for more than it is letting on. We hear the refusal of the deterioration of living conditions, the refusal of the usury produced by the constraints of money, the refusal of the erosion of everything that makes a human being a being who does not take it lying down.

This refusal bursts through the surface of specific demands here and there.

In many towns, demos have not been so big for three generations.

In Merlebach, Orly, Nantes, Paris, Montpellier, Sainte Etienne... strikers, demonstrators rise up against the police armada deployed to defend the commodity, to contain people coming together, to prevent people meeting each other and talking, to neutralize the struggle.

In the street, in the places where there are strikes, waged workers, unemployed, students are starting to talk. In Nantes, Montpellier, Paris, the demonstrators refuse to disperse, occupy the street, seek places to be together.

In Clermont-Ferrand, railworkers invite other strikers and passengers to a banquet in the station. The following week, they organize a ball...

In several towns, EDF (electricity) workers put the electricity onto the cheap rate.

Others restore the electricity to EDF sources. Elsewhere, striking postal workers ensure a minimal service for the unemployed, people on benefits... And all other initiatives which have happened in silence or been twisted by media corrosion.

This confrontation which sets the people in opposition to the state has already claimed its victims - those who attack objects: cars, dustbins, cameras, shop windows, riot shields... have bled, been dragged to the courts, imprisoned.

- One year's prison sentence for a shop window and two shirts in Montpellier...

- Three months for the destruction of a table in Paris...

- Two months for overturning two cars in Paris...



*Casseurs?* These are students, the unemployed, the homeless, waged workers, teachers... They are all expressing a general anger, like the miners of Merlebach or the strikers of Orly.

To demand liberation and amnesty for all the demonstrators is to refuse false divisions: public sector workers, private sector workers, *casseurs* and demonstrators, waged workers and the unemployed, strikers and passengers...

Combating the fear, the fear of tomorrow, of the unknown, of the self, of others, of losing what little we have...

Reversing the situation against those who sustain it, getting our confidence back, giving ourselves the means to meet each other,

in the workplace, in the job centres, the universities, schools, or other places, by opening them up...inviting people in...?

Divided, we are conquered. Our power lies in meeting together.

*Just because it's raining cats and dogs, that's no reason to stop pissing.*

Paris, 10 December 1995

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## WHAT DO WE WANT?

*What do we want?*

Not difficult to know: it's enough to listen to what's being said, not in the anti-chambers or screens of power, but in the processions and the bars, in the occupied stations and the individual modes of transport that have been joyfully collectivized.

*We want to talk*

For the twenty years that the 'crisis' has lasted, we have been told that it's very complicated, that we don't understand anything about it, in short, that we must make sacrifices, that is the price of economic progress. Now, what do we see? The only real crisis is that of a system which rests on the exploitation of wage labour: *There is less and less work, while there is more and more wealth.* It is the system and its pseudo-rationality that is in crisis, that's what we want to talk about.

*We want to get away from the categories that imprison us*

In transforming privileged work, we have been isolated in categories which are supposed to oppose each other to defend or reclaim the morsels of privilege: private salaries against public, against CDI, unemployed against workers, homeless against those who live in rabbit hutches, with the homeless to call everyone who waits for them if they are not wise. It is against this society of generalized blackmail that we have been set in movement. It's against this tendency to increasingly set everyone against each other that we have

started to reunite. Railworkers, posties, students, teachers, unemployed etc. have met at strikes with an ease, a confidence, a desire to listen never seen until now. While eating, singing, drinking and resisting police intimidation, we have discovered a new way of being together. Those who have started to talk are numerous, no longer under the title of their category, but under the title of human. Thousands of people whom the system has separated have woven lines between each other: *This is the main benefit that we have gained in this struggle*, and we will fight to keep it

*We want to keep the strong position*

Already, we have succeeded in putting the brakes on the triumphant rationality of the capitalist economy. No, the movement is not finished. It's up to us to develop the newest elements it has brought:

Let's get away from our categories!

Let's get away from our workplaces to go and meet others!

Let's transform places of pain into places for parties!

Let's take other places, pleasant and heated, and open them to everyone, included and excluded!

Why oblige the SDF to sleep in metro stations? Let's occupy the national palaces!

**All possibilities are still open to us!**

*From those without categories*

mid-December 1995

Contact: La Bonne Descente

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## BEWARE, ONE STRIKING TRAIN MAY CONCEAL ANOTHER

The purpose of a social movement is to continually overthrow aspects of a situation and transform the certitudes of yesterday into the doubts of today and to supply tomorrow's questions. As the relations of power evolve, problems pose themselves with more clarity. The questions raised by the present strike movement are decisive for what follows.

Today the strike has a grip on almost the totality of the public sector. At the same time - at least in Paris - student agitation seems to be having difficulty in transforming itself into a true movement. A minority is engrossed in an assemblyist activism which cannot go beyond the corporatist framework controlled by the unions. The real relations between delegates, students and co-ordinations are being masked by clashes between groupuscules at the heart of co-ordinations which are gradually losing all credibility and are only co-ordinating manipulative projects. The activism of this minority only survives thanks to the new breath brought by the strikes of waged workers. Despite the energy of a few put into making political proposals, despite the radicalization of one section of students, this 'movement' has not been capable, up to now, of going beyond its corporatism, of inventing or liberating a subversive creativity.

In the striking public sector, some aspects are also appearing in a new light. The movement has been set in motion at the grassroots level and is carried by a profound sense of discontent which has existed for a long time in society. However, the great majority of workers seem to have become consumers of their own strike: active participation is being left to union militants. In some cases only collective engagement has been preserved. Whatever it is, the volume of the movement has already carried a dynamic which transcends the initial objectives. In the face of the brutality of the choice of power - which is as determined as the strikers themselves - one can examine the state of the strengths of the movement and its perspectives. Globally, the strike remains under the control of the unions, even if the delegates seem to carry a determining weight. The unions are the only ones negotiating the market which presents itself as the 'reasonable' issue in the conflict. The dawning of the great day of class struggle is necessary for capitalists to measure the situation and to define the framework of a new 'general interest'. A confrontation of this order does not displease them, as long as the market can regulate itself in a friendly manner. The unions also need this struggle to reinvigorate themselves just when they are at their



worst. The form taken by this conflict is an indirect consequence of the crisis in French syndicalism and the urgent necessity for it to regain a minimal ability to represent. This weakness in syndicalism is also the strength of the movement. Recently especially, the strikers are showing themselves to be very open, concerned about what is happening elsewhere in society. They have been capable of extending their struggle from their own strength, leaving their places of exploitation in order to meet other waged workers and to persuade them to join them. And there are many who support the students in struggle.

The absence of forms of organization capable of expressing the determination and new aspirations of the struggle is the movement's main weakness. It explains the passive attitude of one section of proletarians. This absence is even more remarkable given that the isolated struggles of the preceding years had seen the birth of numerous autonomous organizations. Today any generalization of strikes is for the profit of the unions, further reinforcing their capacity for negotiation. From now on the lack of the movement's autonomy in the face of the union apparatus will bring its defeat. If the movement is not capable of transcending itself and creating independent organizations, uniting with those who are unionized or non-unionized, it will also be incapable of connecting with workers from the private sector, who have become, for now, hostages of the bosses. It will no longer be a question of struggling against the 'selling out' of the movement by the unions. It will be too late. The union leaders and the powers that be will share the fruits of all our energy and generosity. Those who submit to this today will be held responsible for it tomorrow. From now on only the transcending of

the leadership of the unions can put the strikes, and the youth in struggle in the universities and schools onto a new level.

The opening out of the struggle towards others by the strikers is one of the strengths of the movement. It allows those who fight alone against the capitalist order to express themselves and to confront their opinions. It is the only activity which seems to me to have any sense today.

#### **INSURRECTION!**

#### **GENERAL STRIKE!**

**No, the railworkers are not privileged!**

**No, the railworkers are not responsible for the financial hole in the SNCF (railways)!**

**The state is responsible - let it pay! It's got the money!**

**Yes, each worker repays more than 6000F per month in interest to the banks.**

**Revolt is good!**

#### **Railworkers**

**local union - Northern Paris**

23 November 1995

*A rebel without frontiers*

## **LAST (BUT NOT LEAST) EXIT TO THE STRIKE. END OF THE STRIKE IN NIMES**

Tuesday 19 December 1995

Since Friday the media have been chanting the same chant about the 'tendency of a return to work', 'the strike is suffocating', 'the general assemblies are becoming angry', 'railway depots are voting for a return to work'. On Saturday 16th December, they were proved right: the Strasbourg depot voted for a return to work. The next day this general assembly voted again for strike action: this fact was for the most part not mentioned.

For some days, the union confederations have made an awful come back. They began certain negotiations with ministers. On the night of Saturday/Sunday, a fax sent from the minister of transport arrives in all the depots via the unionists. 'The *contrat de plan* is frozen'. Pensions are not being touched. All the reforms which concern the railworkers are delayed until later.' The return of corporatism. (During the entire time of the strikes, the men of the state and their collaborators have maintained that the movement was corporatist and political in order to denigrate it. The state and the unions have been busy making of it what they would like it to be and what it was not.) The return of confederations is the return of the traditional union order: channelling, falsification, demagoguery. It is the return to injunctions and threats to the local union branches who have been a part of the strike everywhere as an extended inter-union whatever union they belonged to.

On the afternoon of 19th December railworkers in Nimes vote for a 'suspension of the strike'. The last step towards achieving 'momentarily', as they say, the movement of negotiations are engaged with the local leadership of the SNCF on this theme: for each worker who leaves, another will be hired (whether they retire or are moved).

A large rectangular table was placed in a room under the station. The principal director, surrounded by directors of related services, as well as the union delegates (CGT, CFDT, FO) and, standing, encircling this conventional intimacy, 200 railworkers. The local director, (who is called M. Verité which means Mr. Truth

in French), does not manage to get in touch with the regional director of Montpellier on his mobile phone. He declares that his plans of hiring will not be questioned again and will follow the procedures previously fixed.

Scattered conversations with some railworkers explain this demand by the fact that for them it is not a question of calling to be hired in order to deal with a lack of staff on certain posts, but of 'giving a job to someone who is unemployed': 'We are not fighting for our little SNCF. We are fighting for our children, for everyone. We are fighting for all those who can no longer fight, in the private sector and elsewhere.' 'We voted for a suspension of the strike because we want to spend the holidays peacefully, so that people can travel. To gather strength. In any case, the general assemblies have already been called out for the beginning of January.' Another who declared himself non-unionized regrets that the strike was suspended: 'It shouldn't be stopped like that. After three weeks, they are going to think we're tired.' And he starts speaking with a vaguely sing-song tone to no-one in particular: 'You're tired...' And everyone responds: 'We're not tired...'

There is excitement in the room. For two hours, the railworkers chat and tease each other. The director says that he will telephone again. He is left alone with his mobile. Ten minutes go by and he returns to the room. No news from Montpellier. One railworker declares: 'You'd better tell them something in Montpellier. And that is that there are two hundred of us in the room, that you're in the middle of us and that we have no intention of letting you leave.' The director: 'Are you holding me hostage?' The railworker: 'That's exactly it.' The director demands some time to telephone again. A train conductor explodes: 'Verité, you're nothing but an arsehole, you're really taking us for a load of bloody idiots. One phone call to Montpellier only means that the financiers gain thousands in one second. Verité, I'm going to kill you(!) if you carry on.' His colleagues rush towards him. 'Calm down, calm down, come outside for a breath of fresh air.' The CGT delegate speaks: 'You see



M. Verité, until now the strike was dignified and responsible. You see what's going to happen. You're going to have to deal with a strike which we can no longer control, and you alone will be responsible.' One railworker cuts short the Stalinist speech. 'Right, that's enough. We're going to look for equipment, and we're going to lock the door of the room with Verité in it. Then we'll solder the doors of the depot. I propose that we vote for or against going back out on strike. 'We'll vote! We'll vote!' The delegates huddle among the railworkers. 'Who is in favour of the strike?' All the hands go up followed by a jovial, 'Everyone together! Everyone together!' One railworker who has remained outside proposes to some others that they find the director's car and set fire to it. Another, who had arrived with cans of beer on a trolley, proposes saving the empty bottles. 'They make good missiles, you never know.' A gang comes out of the room and invites everyone to blockade the two trains that are about to leave. 'Everyone together!' Processions in the stations. Trolleys are thrown onto the tracks. Some railworkers get onto the trains, firmly make the conductors leave and let off the alarms. Beautiful music. Another gang decides to shut the station. They get hold of bars, rods, trolleys, and run around the station. They block the doors and set up barricades. The average man in the street is surprised after hearing the TV and the radio announce that the strike is finished everywhere. One passenger says: 'The press, they really are a bunch of liars.' And everyone proclaims 'Everyone together! Everyone together!' Everyone is smiling, especially the railworkers. Everyone goes in front of the room. 'Why didn't you come to the general assemblies, they were open to everyone. Everyone could speak. There were unemployed people, teachers, kids from the electricity board, from Cacharel, the homeless, secondary schoolkids, housewives who all spoke.' The CGT delegate starts speaking again: 'Comrades, we know how to remain dignified, we have shown that we are responsible and proud of our company. We have known how to resist all provocations and we will continue to resist them. The attitude of the directors is a provocation. We will not respond to it.' This wanker had barely finished when everyone applauded and started again 'Everyone together!' etc.

Provocation? Where? When?

The delegate goes into a dark corner. He also has a mobile phone and is probably calling his own boss. Long conversation.

Return to the room. The director has not moved. Some railworkers have gone to find the passengers who are in the blockaded trains. The room fills up with children, young people carrying bags, women old people. One railworker states that the passengers 'are with us' and he describes Verité as responsible for the situation. 'Tell him what you think.' One woman manages to

approach him. 'Monsieur, they're right, you should accept what they are demanding.' The whole room: 'Everyone together! Everyone together!'

Journalists from the local paper arrive. One striker tells them, from the back of the room: 'Watch it boys, we've clocked your faces and we're going to read the paper tomorrow; if you lie again we'll find you.' The journalists stare at their feet. Insults and piss-takes fly in the direction of the director. There is a jokey atmosphere.



Everyone comes out again, and no-one is left in the room except for the unionists and the directors. Outside, there is talk of other depots which have, it seems, relaunched the strike over the same issues. Some of them are telling their families, their children. 'It's pointless to think only of yourself.' Others regret the fact that the private sector has not joined the strike. 'It was an opportunity for them. If they haven't done it now, when will they do it?' Another describes the job of his cousin in a private company and says that everyone is fed up, that everything has to change, that the private sector will come out too: 'They have to.' I talk about the miners of Freyling-Merlebach who attacked public buildings, the police and set fire to the directors' offices. The railworker replies: 'With them it's not the same, it's a question of survival.' 'A question of survival? It's a question of survival for us as well, you can see the kind of world they're trying to make.'

Return to the room. The director is there as well as the CGT. The director: 'Messieurs, I've just been speaking to Montpellier. The regional director is in agreement. For each worker who leaves another is hired for the next three months.' The delegate starts to speak: 'You understand clearly what M. Verité has just said. For each person who leaves, one is hired for the period of renegotiation of the *contrat de plan*. We're going to vote for or against the strike.' Cheers of 'We've won!' etc. The noise stops. One railworker: 'Look! That's not the same thing, what the delegate and the director say.' Murmuring in the room. The delegate becomes smaller. The director comes to shake his hand: 'During the period of the *contrat de plan*, one leaves, one is hired.' When the Stalinist smiles again the whole room starts with: 'We've won, etc.' It gets quieter again and another railworker: 'No, no! That's not how it happens. Verité must sign now. He's already stitched us up.' Verité says: 'I'll sign tomorrow during the negotiations which are a planned with the unions.' 'No, you sign now. One point that's all.' The room is filled with as much laughter as the Stalinist and the director are green. 'Paper for Verité. This is the moment of truth (Verité)' etc. And of course a railworker: 'No! Verité has signed but not the other directors; they must sign as well.' One of the directors states that he cannot be involved. 'We don't give a toss, you sign and if those above you don't agree with it, well, you



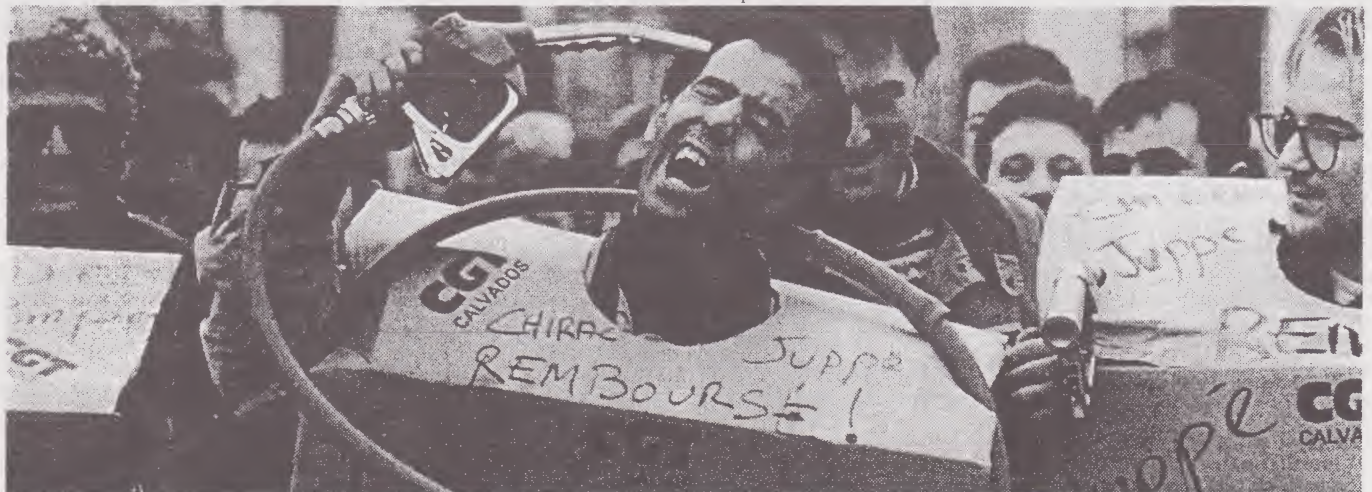


can jump, you're nothing but a fuse.' The guy complies. The delegate breathes a sigh of relief and in a beautiful outburst: 'Comrades, we've just had a beautiful victory. I think that the moment has come to re-vote with responsibility and dignity. I propose that we call off the strike.' One conductor proposes not the stopping of the strike but its suspension. Everyone agrees with using this expression. Unanimous voting for suspension. 'We've won!' 'Everyone together!' etc.

Everyone leaves. In the car park adjacent to the room, red fireworks burn and envelop the atmosphere in smoke. Various conversations, and paradoxically, an atmosphere of bitterness and sadness. One railworker says to me: 'What a bummer, I'll have to go to work tomorrow. I really don't feel like it...' Another says: 'You say we've won. We've only won the pleasure of making the directors bend a little bit and it's really miserable. We want so much more. We want more from this society.' But this kind of talk is articulated among only a few even though everyone thinks it. There is nobody to say it loud and strong, speech is left up to the professionals, the unionists. I start to be more annoyed with the attitude of the anonymous railworkers who are getting excited in small groups and

losing themselves in jokes than with the unions who are going about their usual business which everyone expects of them. The delegate takes the microphone and tries to turn the impressions upside down. 'Comrades, we have achieved a great victory there. We achieved this victory by virtue of our sense of responsibility. We have come out bigger through this. This strike will have been exemplary in its calmness and dignity.' He begins to applaud. A delegate from the FO says: 'It's true we've won. But nothing is finished. The general assemblies will take place at the beginning of January to make the point.' The applause gets warmer. Some railworkers with whom I'd been chatting and whose hands I'd shaken when the station had been closed pushed me towards the microphone: 'Everyone here knows that I'm not a railworker. I represent no-one. What I want to say is: Thanks. Thanks for fighting for everyone, for having given expressed the feelings in this country where for years and years we haven't stopped taking it lying down. Thanks for having given us back the desire and the taste of talking and talking to each other. Thanks and see you soon.' 'Everyone together, everyone together', the railworkers replied. Even the CGT applauded. Some railworkers hugged me. For one moment... I disappeared into the darkness. Some railworkers joined me again and asked me how they could get in touch with me again. I leave my address.

The next day, at a final, poxy demo, I will meet up with a railworker who will say to me: 'This morning at work, there was no joy. No-one felt like working. We were changed. Imagine, for 23 days, I had never taken so much pleasure in going to the depot. And I've been working at the SNCF for fifteen years. My wife moaned a bit, she didn't see much of me. That's to be expected. But the atmosphere was extraordinary. We didn't want it to stop. When you see the unions saying that it's a beautiful victory, not one railworker thinks that. We lost, that's it. We won nothing. But morale is good. Above all, we are really angry now. When people say we suspended the strike, it's not to show off. The strike has been suspended. We'll wait for the new year holiday to pass. And afterwards we'll start again. Everyone is saying so.' I bring up the attitude of the railworker who had threatened to attack the director the day before: 'Of course he's right. Everyone thinks the same. They really don't give a toss about us. But we mustn't give in to these bastards. That weakens us. As if we don't already have enough to defend.' We speak of situations where there is nothing left to say. We speak of the running of the trains by strikers themselves and for free. 'It's a long running debate amongst us. We can do it. The problem is that we are prosecuted. As long as the movement is strong, we can hold out, the conductors and the others are risking nothing. But when the movement gets weaker, the cops will come and nick people who they pick out and isolate. So...The movement must always exist. It's not simple of course.'





## The Strike and After

### Foreword

The following text has no pretension of drawing the full picture of the 1995 winter crisis on the scale of the whole country, but of giving my point of view based on my own reflection and my own, very modest, participation in the movement of insubordination in Paris. Its aim is not to end discussion but, on the contrary, to encourage the opening up of debate amongst those who intend going further than just recording events. To understand today the advances as well as the failures seems essential - in order to avoid being tossed about by unseen situations tomorrow.

'To reflect is not to genuflect.'

Whatever the admirers of neo-liberal democracy might think, capitalism at the end of this century is the inverse of the image it presents. Behind the humanitarian mask appears the increasingly implacable inhumanity of exploitation and domination. The aggravated capitalization of life generates horrors without end to such an extent that, in the most civilized countries it is henceforth difficult to regard them as contingent and temporary.

From the point of view of the masters of this world, the World Bank being the appointed manager, many things remain to be done to crush their slaves and give free reign to their all-consuming ambitions: to devastate the planet and let loose the domesticating power of capital. For the factions in power in France it is necessary to get it over with - and quickly. They are impelled by the expiry dates for European integration, and in a more general way, by the requirements of the world market for which they are, in the final analysis, only acting as proxies. But it was enough for state employees to demonstrate their refusal to submit for the well-oiled machine, set in primed motion by the present managers, to begin to seize up.

For the leadership of the trade unions, who are always hostile to individual and collective initiatives which escape their control, the decision to call a strike was the result of exhausting negotiations conducted with all the pedantry and ceremony proper to democracy with the objective of gaining credibility from people concerned. But individuals not lacking in decision already know from experience that the formal unanimity thus achieved doesn't signify anything in itself. Without waiting for the approval of all their still hesitant comrades, they not only went on strike but also began to seize the signal control centres.

Such initiatives were denounced by the SNCF management as irresponsible acts 'which put the security of the rail network and equipment at risk' whereas it is them who have been responsible for numerous railway catastrophes on the lines which don't pay - by letting them fall into disrepair. In reality, such acts reveal the vulnerability of the transport network which is more and more centralized and computerized. The generalization of the latest technology is at once the source of the power and the general weakness of the system. It is an arm of capital to domesticate humans and to render their presence more and more obsolete. At the same time, all that was necessary was for a handful of individuals to occupy the control centres and signal power boxes, carry out some basic acts of sabotage, like erasing the computer memory, for the network to be paralysed in its entirety.

The leadership of the trade unions viewed with suspicion the first spontaneous outbursts which took place without their approval and which would have enormous unforeseen consequences. For those responsible for labour power, work is life itself and a strike is merely one of the unfortunate means the wardens of survival are sometimes obliged to use in order to attain their desired end. They do not understand that to stop work, even in a momentary fashion, forms

part of the pleasures of life even though it absorbs a lot of energy and you lose money sometimes.

For a great deal of the strikers, the strike, on average, was set to become an end in itself. An activity breaking with the everyday. It allowed heads to be lifted up and the cycle of resignation to be broken, to break somewhat, trade separation, to speak, to party, to demonstrate in the street and - and why not? - to feast with the people in the neighbourhood, which, by the way, happened much more on the fringes than in the centre of Paris, now being transformed into a museum and into a commercial centre for luxury goods.

The holders of state power, apologists for social Darwinism<sup>2</sup>, have denounced such unwillingness as the 'corporatism of the privileged worker', in short, as a survival reflex of antediluvian species unable to adapt. This view has nothing new about it. It dates from some fifteen years ago when the workers in traditional industries resisted, sometimes very violently, their disappearance ... a primordial situation in order to bring the stubborn under control and permit the reconversion of capital.

The workers in state industries like the SNCF are, by tradition, marked by corporatism and underpinned by professional pride. But when the initiators of the first strikes affirmed that they were 'striking for themselves but also for all proletarians waged and unwaged', they showed that they were overcoming their habitual shopkeepers' outlook which had caused so much wrong during the preceding strikes, in particular during the winter of 1986.

The content of the first intense discussions held, as often as not, in cafés as well as in assemblies, showed that there had been some subterranean maturation well before the outbreak of the strike. The majority were, to be sure, mainly preoccupied with the many questions relating to the status of the state workers. But a more conscious and determined minority went much further and attempted to tackle all the problems of daily survival. The responses were very confused, jainted with ideology and the language of pure democracy,<sup>3</sup> but one felt a critical reflection, a search for real perspectives which would permit 'the human to be replaced at the centre against the dictatorship of the market', beyond capital's inhuman categories and the separations and roles which accompany them.

Thus, the strikers at SNCF, telecom, RATP (metro) and even the electricity industry accepted that people not belonging to the state industries were present in the general assemblies, organizing soup kitchens for down-and-outs and reconnecting, in part, electricity to shelters for the poor. These were the seeds of helping one another break with the ideology of belonging to a firm and the insane egotism peculiar to contemporary capitalism.

Ridicule failed to kill anymore: the wretched attempts by the state to set the population against the strikers failed. After the fiasco of the first demonstration of 'angry passengers held hostage by the strikers', it decided to cancel the following demos. In spite of the generalization of disorder on urban transport, the population were not at all unsympathetic to the strikers, an attitude which stood out clearly from the latent hostility during the preceding SNCF strikes, in particular during the winter of 1986. In general, the sympathy was passive sometimes active: the setting up of a support fund for the strikers, putting up those occupying depots in the centre of Paris and who lived too far away on the outskirts to return every evening to their home, etc.

There were moments when it was possible to think that things were going to go much further. But the initial dynamism foundered, then came to a halt, without the demands which had caused the strike even being met, in spite of the general bitterness when the strikes were called off and the continuation of certain pockets of resistance.



The repression had been restrained, except in ultra-sensitive sectors to the functioning of capital, like in the electricity industry, where it was directed at isolated pockets of unyielding resistance. The absence of cash, the fear of being without it and of being laid-off, had been some factors which had contributed to the general inertia, in particular in the most structured sectors of capital where self-reliance, the war of one against all and of each against themselves, are, henceforth the rule. But the strikers themselves were less hamstrung by lack of money, at least immediately. Moreover, the determined among them replied to people who proposed to raise money on their behalf: 'we are fed up with striking by proxy. Better to go out on strike yourselves'. The critique of 'striking by delegates' was to the point. It put in relief the somewhat amorphous behaviour of ordinary citizens, accustomed at work to delegate the resolution of their problems to official and officious individuals and therefore, scarcely inclined to show any spirit of initiative. Moreover, on the whole they continued to work, willingly or reluctantly, at best marching behind the trade union leadership, with the unemployed sometimes by their side. Even the mass of strikers were less and less mobilized. They stuck to the simple matter of renewing the strike through the general assemblies, participating in demonstrations and in the parties organized at their workplaces.

Against the prevailing passivity, the most combative strikers called for 'the generalization of the strike'. The formula was ambiguous: it meant they considered their own activity, the strike they had embarked on, as the obligatory reference point for all potential revolts.

The unblocking of the situation could not come from the simple increase in the number of strikes. The extension was, in part, subordinate to radicalization, to bypassing the limited character of the initial initiatives which had stirred the mass of protesters. The contradiction between the breadth of the protest and the near general absence of a subversive perspective was clear to those who had not lost their clarity. In spite of their combativity, the protesters had stumbled over two essential questions, that of the function of work and concomitantly, the role of the state and in particular, the welfare state.

The strikers in the state sector were rejecting the devalorization of their situation. But they had taken on board as unassailable their alleged mission, 'to be at the service of all citizens'. They had valorized what their survival was based on: their work. They endowed it with unique virtues whereas here, as elsewhere, work has become something very functional, with no particular meaning to workers except that it permits them to have money and to be recognized as citizens. Their sole peculiarity is to be an integral part of the state's communication system.

Furthermore, the state workers who had been able to profit from the weakness of the latest technology in their workplaces had not understood the modifications these had already led to in the rest of society. They were hoping their strike would paralyse the economy in its entirety and would therefore force the State to give in over the essentials. Nothing of the sort happened.

In the Paris region, the transport blockade had been total, much more so than in the winter of 1986, but the impact had been less. Industry has practically disappeared to the benefit of finance, the press, etc. There the computerization of work processes predominate. Firms have been capable, much more so than previously, of carrying out their essential activities thanks to flexi-time and the use of home based computer terminals. Some managers had hesitated to put similar measures into operation because they were in doubt about the enthusiasm of their personnel and preferred to have them under their watchful eye in order to control them. Moreover, the nature of work did not always permit it, in particular in the retail trade. But the tone was set.

The concept of a communication network less and less overlaps that of the transport network. To increase the pressure, it would have been necessary for strikers to block other networks which

was difficult to achieve without the connivance of employees in telecom, The electricity industry, etc. The strike in the electricity industry (EDF) would have had a much greater impact to the degree where the communications network couldn't function without electricity. But the trade union leadership, aware of dangers, broke the few strikes which took place in the electricity industry and warned the over-excited against 'acts which endangered the security of power stations and the grid'.

Behind the fixation on retaining acquired privileges, there appeared ambiguities at the same time towards the welfare state. For example, calls for guaranteed employment, even payment for not being employed.

The system of labour protection, put in place on the morrow of the Liberation, was indispensable to the reconstruction of the basis of the state, and a prelude to the subsequent frenzied accumulation of capital over the next 30 glorious years. Labour power was then considered as the most precious capital. The recent changes within capital, in particular technological changes, have brought into question its centrality and as a consequence, the state treats it as a depreciating commodity whose upkeep is expensive and worthy of being thrown in the waste paper basket.

Moreover, the domination of the welfare state was of a piece with the helping-out mentality. It had accustomed citizens to seeing their survival problems taken in hand and decided by a supreme authority in a practically quasi-automatic fashion without there being any need to intervene themselves. This renunciation had been the reverse of protection. In particular, it wasn't for nothing that in the atomization and partial asthenia that stubborn individuals, because of their hatred of work, fled firms in order to try and live a little. Despite the partial questioning of the welfare state, the need for social security wastes and encourages the partial neutralization of energies which, if not, would become dangerous to society.

Neo-liberalism is to be sure inhuman. But it does no more than reveal the internal essence of capital: for it, the human is only of interest to the degree it is capitalizable. From now on, more than ever, it will be too much. When state power becomes the apologist for labour, it is not because it thinks that the employment of all potential workers remains the primordial condition for the value creating process of capital but in order to try to make good, at the least cost, a life of inactivity, the origin of revolts. The state has a horror of emptiness. So to keep order, any kind of activity is better than none at all, such is the credo of neo-liberalism which has taken over from the apologists of the welfare state. Work remains the best cop even though the mode of contemporary capital's functioning renders practically impossible the employment of all available human beings, even on the cheap.

It might appear paradoxical that some protesters who were indifferent to politics should have granted so much importance to the idea of democracy: faced with the authoritarianism of state power, the defence of citizenship appeared to them indispensable.

In France, the myth of the sovereignty of the people has always been of great importance in the minds of the average citizen. They see there the means of disposing of despots, although it resurfaces without ceasing from the representation they have themselves chosen. But the myth would never have a similar hold on them if the state had not also appeared as their protector with the setting up of the welfare state. Not only did it assimilate, in the last analysis, citizens with workers, but also as workers it protected them somewhat, they and their families, against the upset and risks inherent to wage workers in the service of capital. In France, the welfare state had thus realized up to the end the democratization of the state.

From now on, the transformation of capital shall make citizenship appear as a pure political form without a socially effective content. That is why the reduction of the protective role of the state is linked to the partial, and even total questioning by the excluded, of the statute of citizenship. Here also, neo-liberalism plays a revelatory



role. Democracy appears, even under a benign appearance, as what it always had been: the domination of capital.

The winter crises also revealed the paradoxes of contestation for official unionism. The protesters have, *en masse*, expressed willy-nilly, their refusal of neo-liberalism following union officials to the degree that, with the exception of those in the CFDT, they made a show of mobilizing them.

It is, however, notorious that in France disaffection with trade unionism has considerably increased over the years. At the risk of abstraction, the period of radicalization after May '68 had not shown a surpassing of the trade union strait jacket. Rather, it had sanctioned atomization, the dissolution of former combative communities and submission to the imperatives of capitalist restructuring.

But the principal characteristics of the welfare state in France is to have integrated the trade unions, who at times have preserved the facade of contestation, into organs for the protection of labour. 'Paritarisme' (the equal representation of both sides when management and trade union leaders meet) gave the impression to the trade union rank and file, and continues to give it despite de-unionization, of having a direct hold over state management through the intermediary of their leaders.

From their angle, the majority of trade union bosses were apprehensive; the reduction in the contractual function of the state would mean to them the loss of sinecures and positions even if the tendency to participate in the mode of neo-liberal management was pronounced among them and not only in the CFDT. What's more, they knew that their acknowledgement as partners by state power depended on their being representatives and their capacity to enclose and derail trouble in the enterprises, especially in attracting and controlling the most combative individuals which appeared.

Already for a number of years, the day belonged not to exclusion (except in the CFDT) but to recuperation, in order to try to broaden the base of the pyramid whose mummified summit was in danger of falling to pieces. The shop floor delegates' development is henceforth very different from that of preceding generations. The oldest had often participated in radical groupings which had sprung up after May '68, particularly in workshop committees outside of the main trade unions. The bankruptcy of their revolutionary political pretensions had led them to devote the majority of their energy to rank and file trade unionism even when they were sometimes members of Trotskyist/anarchist groups, etc. The youngest have come from the co-ordinations of winter '86. They are pretty indifferent to trade union labels; not uncommonly they belong at one and the same time to several organizations including the libertarian wing of the CNT. Their combativity is at times real. But, as long as they manoeuvre within a framework of a trade unionism approved by the state, they are tolerated by their leaderships as elements necessary to their survival and to the maintenance of their influence over the incredulous who, for want of better, accorded them some credit for trying to limit the damage.

The trade union leadership played the game well. The basis of their subtle sabotage was double language. They had, in part, consigned to the basement their stall-holder slanging matches and sought to consolidate, for the moment at least, the branch on which they were sitting and which they had contributed to sawing through. Hence the demagogic appeals to a 'unitary inter-trade action through the generalization throughout the country of strikes and demonstrations for the scrapping of the Juppé Plan'. In reality they refused to extend the strikes, in particular in the electricity industry (EDF), monopolizing speech and communication in the strikers' assemblies, controlling demonstrations and causing them to degenerate into inoffensive, repetitive marches in which the aim was exhausting their energies and preventing the most radical of them taking over the local branches after their own fashion.

The winter crises confirmed the breakthrough of a renewed rank and file trades unionism recomposing itself outside of traditional confederations, very much upsetting the different leaderships, in particular the leadership of the CFDT. From now on the model is the SUD.

The frequent references by the founders of the SUD to the origins of revolutionary syndicalism, indeed of anarcho-syndicalism for those who are also members of the CNT, to the original trade unions and to the first associations which had as their objective the emancipation of the workers, could be deceptive. Likewise their hostility to the most narrow minded corporatism.

But their steps were more the result of the exclusion imposed by the leadership of the CNT than of any critical reflection. In reality, they are participating in the renewal of trades unionism, a renewal based both on taking up the theme of self-management and the taking into account of the phenomenon of exclusion, up to then neglected by the main unions. They combine the traditional defence of the right of state employees with the defence of the workless, the homeless and illegal immigrants, participating in the creation of charitable organizations and multiplying contacts with those religious and lay people who are taking over from the state in matters of social assistance.

The SUD is already an integral part of a combination movement such as the purest democrats of our epoch dream of, champions of 'the defence of civil society against the attacks of state power'. But the renovated combination movement is rotten even before flowering: it is born out of the decomposition of the former



Les services publics,



professional trade unionism, based on the identification of individuals with their type of work, and from the emergence of new reformist associations based on the aim of integrating into the world of work all those who have been excluded, so that they become citizens in their entirety. In spite of the good will of a number of SUD members, this atypical trade unionism, as they like to call it, has nothing revolutionary about it.

The irony is that the bureaucratism of the main unions does not stop them from participating in the institutional mechanisms in the state industries, in particular, in elections which allow them to be recognized by the state as the official representatives of the staff. The notion of not abandoning the terrain of power-sharing institutions, from workers' committees to administrative councils, to the managers is completely worn through. The terrain is full of pitfalls, delegates are admitted as co-managers of labour-power.

Faced with the institutionalization of the SUD, some protesters propose to limit the duration of delegates' participation in the co-management organizations and even to elect and revoke them on the basis of only the decisions taken in general assemblies and strike committees. But no formal procedure has ever impeded the appearance of a hierarchy within the institutions even when the base is regarded as sovereign. As long as individuals express the need to be represented, they are always confronted by the fact that the representation that they have chosen escapes their control.

It is customary in France for demonstrators to try to get round obstacles encountered in concrete struggle through a recourse to abstract recipes. Faced with the incapacity to understand what was shackling the development of the content and the contents of the movements unfolding, there was a return to apologetics regarding well-known forms. But, detached from the context that gave them life and meaning, they were nothing more than dead, hollow formulas, phantoms which no longer arouse fear in the holders of state power and their acolytes in the trade union hierarchy. Because the trade unions, for fear of throwing petrol on the fire, have avoided using the term general strike, some protesters thought they saw in it the miracle solution. But whatever their good intentions, they have only tried to outbid their rivals.

The general strike of May '68 constituted their blue-chip stock *par excellence*. In so doing, they no longer demonstrated any critical spirit. For the mass radical movement which broke out then had already passed the very limited confines of the general strike. It began to question work and many other aspects of daily survival: the family, school, urbanism, etc. Under the control of the unions, the occupations quickly shut themselves away and sometimes turned hostile to anything which wasn't to do with the corporate struggle. So leave the dead in peace. The wheel has turned. The structure of society has undergone an in-depth transformation with the commodity invading the totality of relations plus the near total demolition of working class communities which had, in spite of their corporatism, put up a resistance to capital. It has become impossible in France to identify the modern islets of contemporary capitalism, workers and non-workers, with the former workers of industrial capitalism which then constituted the heart of the economy, with the exception of, partly, state industries and what remains of the classical industrial firms.

To go on strike is not reduced in importance because work, as a feature of the domestication of individuals, remains the basis of society's functioning. But the general disruption of the work process throughout the country is, less than ever, the model for combat for every particular revolt. The ensemble of roles and the straight-jackets which suffocate us overwhelm the confines of work. Henceforth, work disruptions are only one of the moments of the movements of insubordination against state power and contemporary society. Witness the urban riots endemic to the megalopolis of the most advanced countries which already, in spite of the limited character of their objectives, are no less a very characteristic manifestation of revolt in our epoch.

It is impossible to say today what will happen tomorrow. The outcome of the winter movement has not been settled in advance. In relation to those of the recent past it has achieved some advances but, at the same time, it has revealed the existence of enormous obstacles. Of course these are not, *a priori*, insurmountable and must not become the pretext for kow-towing. Nothing is inevitable, and as the celebrated saying recalls: 'the power of the masters also rests on the weakness of the slaves'.

However, it none-the-less remains true that historical conditions have been modified. The Juppé plan is not the only fruit of the neo-liberal fads of the technocrats in delirium who are today in power in France. In this case the mass strikes of winter would have been enough to cause its withdrawal. But behind them looms the menacing shadow of the real enemy whose managers they only are. The enemy is global capitalism which has decided, on a planetary scale, to deliver the *coup de grace* to those it has not yet got under control. It's also the reason why the shrewd Juppé plan has the capacity to take a lot of punishment.

Moreover, the victims of neo-liberalism are in a corner. On the one hand, the oldest are scarcely enthused by the programmes coming from bygone periods which in general were reformist. On the other hand, young people have grown up in the shadow of the crises, in an atmosphere of generalized nihilism, which characterizes contemporary capitalism.

Even when the determination to unravel it is real, the absence of a global perspective for overcoming the survival which envelopes them condemns them to explosions of anger which are considerable but without any follow up at the moment, when even a simple resistance to the encroachment of capital is a very arduous thing to achieve. Capital has always taken back what it granted the night before and one cannot appraise the winter movement in terms of a balance sheet. But the non-satisfaction of basic demands had a part to play in the feeling of powerlessness. We don't live only for the pleasures of the flesh but when they aren't to be had those of the spirit offer no consolation.

The absence of great aims does not prompt the use of great means except in very particular situations. Power understood this. In spite of the fear the massive work stoppages in state industries aroused in them, they relied more on the likelihood of decay than on savage repression and gave way to sectional demands only to accelerate the decomposition.

A handful of irreducibles in Paris and the regions, in order to struggle against defeatism and the return to atomization following the return to work, have taken it upon themselves to think and act in a co-ordinated fashion in expectation of a hypothetical resumption. The initiative is not without interest. But it is essential to comprehend that it cannot be a matter of reconstituting the action committees, such as existed in the period of radicalization inaugurated by May '68. And still less the co-ordinations, in the image of those which arose during the preceding strikes and which sought to be the representatives of different trades and professions in struggle. Without neglecting the exchange of information and the rest, it is, more than ever, necessary to draw up a critique of the movement of insubordination which we participated in. The possibility that individuals refusing to accept resignation will converge depends on it. What is necessary, in particular, is the critique of trades unionism, even atypical trades unionism. It is difficult because it could be the cause of a distancing, not only as regards trade union leaderships, but also as regards friends who are still full of illusions on the question of rank and file trade unionism, and not comprehending the critique, the latter could liken it to a rupture in relations forged during the strike. But it is today one of the conditions enabling us to act by ourselves and for ourselves.

ANDRÉ



## France End of 1995: Anger and Huge Strikes

Governments today are so accustomed to hammering into peoples' heads arguments to do with economic logic (calculability, profitability, competitiveness). Used repeatedly they believe it will enable them to pass no matter what measure. It is true that in Europe since the commencement of the big neo-liberal offensive some ten years ago the movements which arose to oppose it have only rarely been able to prove the contrary. To date, the last which succeeded in France was against the CIP (creation of a minimum wage for those under 25 and obviously inferior to the minimum salary in force). In any event the present French government has starkly shown itself to have a large appetite for economic adjustments: privatizations (which have been a bad experience for a far from negligible part of the population) had, when they touched on the public sector, aroused deep suspicion. And, it was at this point that Prime Minister Juppé had sought to put into effect the plan for restructuring the SNCF which had been on the cards for several years, comprising an undermining of railway workers' social benefits, a reduction of the SNCF's public function and, as an inevitable consequence, lay-offs to come (after tens of thousands over the last few years). At the same time a plan for the reform of social security was put forward with the aim of balancing the budget - that old monster.

It was already practically inevitable and foreseen several months previously that the railworkers were going to go on strike to protest against the 'agreed on plan', that is, the projected restructuring of the SNCF. Any eventual overhaul such as specific retirement provisions had not yet been announced. The railway workers had for some years vigorously denounced the logic of profitability which they were the butt of. The plan would only push things further. The logic of the TGV had profoundly altered the SNCF's financial politics and reduced to a secondary role the notion of public service. This meant firstly a huge indebtedness and hence the technocratic necessity to make the railways pay - therefore railway staff had to be reduced, and fares increased according to market logic. Reservations were to be obligatory and tickets purchased an hour before departing practically like air travel. Bit by bit, the notion that there existed non-profitable lines which had to be axed, no matter what problems this would pose to passengers, began to command attention. When work loads become punishing and are not acknowledged as such the more it becomes the norm. Hence proposals to reduce any advantage linked to this aspect.

In these conditions, where conflict was already virtually inevitable, the announcement, at the same time, of a plan 'levelling down' specific public sector provisions and a plan to redress social security financing, substantially modifying its administration, could only unleash the railway workers' anger. The public sector, whose privileges were also threatened, supported them on a massive scale as relatively did people who found the social security reforms disquieting. All this has unleashed a wave of strikes in the public sector, principally in the transport sector (trains, metro, bus, Paris at a complete standstill) and the post office, virtually paralysing the entire country for three weeks.

It is hardly a matter of indifference that the strike was, in large part, catalysed by the overhaul of the social security system bringing it solely under the control of the state. What people feared, and doubtless with good cause given the European priority of profitability in all areas of the public sector, is that once it became a state concern, nothing could prevent it from making economies in the future - even the prospect of privatization - a reduction in contributions increasing the difficulties of average and below-average wage earners. Besides, it wasn't surprising that a majority of French people had no confidence in a government when it came to reforming social security. Over the last few years adjustments have already taken place which, each time, have entailed a reduction in

entitlements, making life even harder for poor people. In the era of privatization frenzy, increased competitiveness and relocations, social security had become a symbol of something which had escaped the globalization of the economy, something which still vaguely belonged to the public.

Generally this strike wave had revealed more precisely a latent feeling on behalf of a considerable number of the badly paid that, after ten years, they were not going to put up with any more sacrifices in the name of global competition which had not sensibly improved the precarious nature of their survival, and quite the contrary of what had been affirmed in economic circles. What was starkly revealed was a weariness with the politics of profitability at any price practised by both the state and enterprises. That is the European logic, the logic of budgets, the control of spending which necessarily signifies a reduction in social investments by the state and an increase in insecurity which had begun to be felt as insupportable. The promised compensation of a reduction in unemployment corresponding to a renewed acceleration of the economy increasingly appeared as a mirage wheeled out solely to reassure. People have not yet got around to openly and explicitly criticizing this 'Europe' such as statesmen and bosses conceive it but, being obliged to submit a little more to the yoke of balance sheets and profitability, to seeing the promised jobs going to Asia or South America, a permanent doubt has set in. In order to participate in the development of international markets, it is not necessary to count on the enthusiasms of the crowds. People are only trying to save their bacon.

In this movement of discontent, there is a determination to contest economic logic, refusing the proposed new plans according to this economic logic even though doing so on a defensive terrain, desperately clinging on to previous gains.

Some hundreds of thousand people regularly demonstrated in the streets simply shouting 'down with the overhaul of pensions', 'down with the overhaul of social security', and ending by calling for Juppé's sacking. All this could often be compared with a trade union demo with the usual predictable break-aways. Except that the number of demonstrations in the regions were striking (sometimes around 100,000 in towns with around several hundreds of thousand inhabitants) and that the demonstrations lasted for several weeks without peoples determination, in response to the arrogance of power, weakening - in spite of the loss of a not negligible amount of money. This had been seen to such a marked degree for a very long time, some said, not even since 1968.

The movement has expressed an interesting tendency desiring a real dialogue and a clean sweep of authoritarian decisions and the ever-ready plans of experts which are implemented shamelessly, even violently, and, if the resistance is too powerful, by negotiations which invariably end up agreeing on something, (which seems to be the case now, given that the strike has ebbed and the government has not given a proper guarantee, at least as far as concerns social security reform).

This tendency to take democracy at its face value showed up regularly in the remarks of strikers and people who were interviewed. It even happened one Wednesday evening on December 1st during a live TV broadcast which laid claim to being democratic by letting strikers speak (in fact, the time allocated to them was far less than to the crew of invited experts). The strikers however, detourné and extended democracy. We were able to hear directly the statements of postal workers and striking railway workers in spite of TV contrivances not allowing them to speak for long enough so they could not really develop their ideas. (All the same, they succeeded in making their presence felt sufficiently to be given a little time to talk). We were able to hear a SNCF striker remind us



that if the SNCF was so in debt it was because it had been financed for ten years without adequate funding, the Pharaoh-like TGV project which had been decided on solely by the experts and which now everyone had to pay for and that there was no reason to look elsewhere for the famous SNCF debt. Finally, each group of strikers interviewed managed to get in a direct live appeal to generalize the strike - all this at a peak viewing hour (between 21 and 23.30 hours). The programme's presenter was definitely in for a roasting that night.

It is necessary however to temper the enthusiasm which could inspire a relatively massive strike in Europe at the present time where such movements have a tendency to be uncommon.

Firstly, it was only at SNCF and the Parisian transport network (RATP and the buses) that there was an overwhelming majority for strike action followed by the post and sorting offices (around 100 out of the 130 offices paralysed) - but, less well in the financial department sectors and FOS (only a few days and not everywhere). In the EDF (French electricity industry) only around 40 per cent came out on strike in the second week of the conflict with cuts occurring regularly in certain regions. In French Telecom it was less. Teachers joined in only after two weeks had elapsed although on a massive scale. In the rest of the public sector the support was considerably less, joining in on the three or four most important demonstrations in large numbers but not subsequently going on strike. The private sector for its part had only marginally been represented. All the same, it is essential to note that in spite of the daily difficulties created by the absence of transport (especially in the Parisian region) many people who continued to go to and from work reserved their smiles and sympathies for the strikers claiming solidarity with their demands even if they didn't see their way forward to the possibility of joining in.

Secondly, the nature of the proposals having led to the strike (social security/public sector pensions and the agreed-on plan for the SNCF), had provided a staging post for the major trade unions who kept control over the movement and its opportunities even if they were sometimes thrust aside and necessarily had to go along with strikers determined to demonstrate their anger. But it had always been at stake that the demanded withdrawal of the proposals would be followed by their subsequent re-negotiation. By whom? The trade union experts naturally. Obviously such control of the movements possibilities had weighed on the ideas, the development of the debate and the furtherance of a critique of society. The trade unions had shifted this onto the political terrain against the government in power nicely aided by Juppé's boasting stance. And this tendency in the movement to express a profound dissatisfaction with the neo-liberal transformation of society and the dismantling even of the idea of public service (because what counts, above all, is profitability imposed by experts whilst, by definition, the notion of public service must come from the public deriving satisfaction according to its will and deliberation) has only been incompletely sketched out and expressed under the form of defensive slogans. Swept along by the groundswell, the unions decided to calm things down by calling for militant demonstrations which passed off to the detriment of reflecting on the reasons for this discontent and to communicating this essential aspect.

It is not by chance that this time there wasn't any autonomous co-ordination leading the movement. On the one hand, concerning the planned restructuring of the SNCF, the CGT, which is still very influential in this sector, had the time to foresee the conflict and prepare to be an active force. Regarding the issue of social security, the FO, which has been partly responsible for its management for several decades, was not going to let such a bastion fall without doing anything. Marc Blondel, its leader, had not ceased to let rip during the conflict in order to obtain what he wanted: a subsequent re-negotiation with the unions and, once he obtained it, he had made haste on one thing only: that the strikes end. These elements marked the weakness, the movement's lack of an independent spirit which, in spite of its determination and pugnacity, let its possibilities be pretty well smothered by the trade unions.

The force of the movement has, at times, been compared with May '68. In fact the relationship with '68 is far from being a direct one and the size and of the demonstrations, at least in the regions, could only make one think so sometimes.

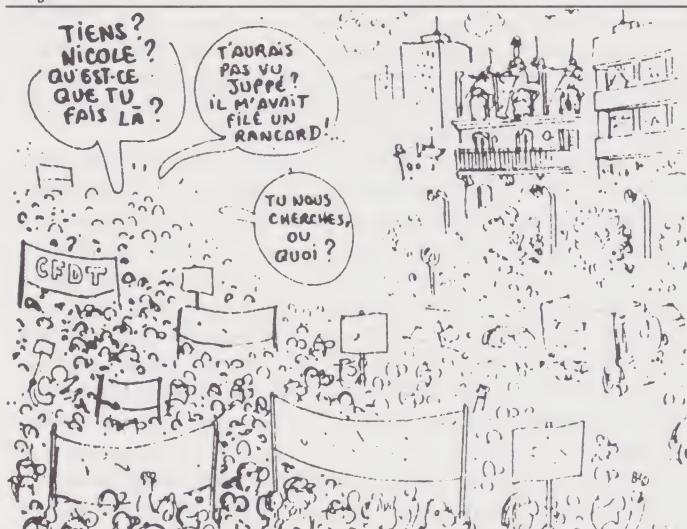
There has been a change of mentality. Insecurity has grown since then. People defend themselves more than they go on the attack and, although their determination is great, they increasingly feel they have their backs to the wall. Perhaps it is still a matter of changing the social system but it does not directly express itself as such. What hasn't changed much are the methods used by governments and trade unions to limit conflicts in a way that enables them to be resolved without changing anything essential in life. In 1968 people gave free reign to their enthusiasm for destabilizing a far too peaceful France, staid governments, the daily grind. The question of social activity was posed in its essence: attack on hierarchies, the questioning of work itself as alienation ('never work'). Peace finally had been bought through a hefty wage rise. But society had burnt with an intense flame.

The atmosphere today is far from being so inflammatory, the imagination is not always there at the appointed time, spirits are flagging, people have retreated generally, 'globalization' strides implacably onwards. They fear for their children and daren't stride out (especially in the private sector literally knocked sideways by lay-offs and insecurity). they are ready to protest that they want no more aggravation and seek to pose the social question in terms of guaranteed employment. Unfortunately, it is not just a trade union slogan. 'Employment' has become a national obsession in France and that, of course, prevents any fundamental questioning of government means (whether right or left, they fundamentally obey the logic of profitability and global competition) and the aims and means of firms. How far away it seems from the popular need to seize real power in society and, starting right from wherever it may be, to assemble and decide on what to do and what sort of activity. There is a tendency to want more than simply holding on to past gains but it remains powerless, paralysed by the apparent immensity of its task: the questioning of global logic.

The strike has become serious, responsible. It lacks a dose of madness in order to think beyond social security, retirement and the future of the railways.

One thing is certain, the apparently unstoppable managerial dialogue finished up, on account of reducing the mass of wage earners to a precarious existence, by colliding headlong with determined resistance. The entire logic of the economic arguments seeking to justify austerity plans could not prevent people from feeling that the only thing that made their lot supportable, if not enviable - that is a minimum of security - was being blown sky high by global competition. For now, this is expressed only by the defence of past gains, in the need for a return to security (wages, pensions, social security, state support) and trade union experts are well placed to channel these ideas springing from dissatisfaction. It is the social wrapping indispensable to survival in a world that is fundamentally competitive and individualistic. Bit by bit, this social wrapping is eroding, the forward march of Europe wants it thus because it fits perfectly with the world movement of markets and economic liberalization. There is therefore a good chance that one will often see the return of such movements against insecurity elsewhere in Europe. The problem that is posed is knowing how these movements can break free from ideas limited to the defence of a security that is not exactly exciting and enviable. The leaden weight of the trade unions is still capable of limiting the debate, but beyond this problem it is in the hands of each and everyone that the limitation of ideas thrives. Between the mostly aimless and violent outbursts in French suburbs and the fatalism dominating society as regards the advance of commodity logic, there is not today an influential pole of opposition that has succeeded in establishing itself. Over the last few years there have certainly been new things like the homeless movement, those of the excluded and unemployed which have freely denounced and forced state bureaucracy to insist that immediate





concrete solutions be found for people in a state of pressing need, deprived of all material support and slipping into vagrancy. By occupying government buildings, in forcing open in a real sense the doors of ministries, they have ensured that some attention and comfort are accorded to them. But, up to now, their aim, the satisfaction of urgent needs, has become more or less mingled with that of survival. Their appeals for solidarity, if completely justifiable, have been too tainted with humanism, even by Christian good will (Abbot Pierre for example), to dare to attack the social logic at the very root of the problem which leads to these sinister consequences. Increasingly people are to be seen without a roof over their heads, wandering aimlessly about, totally discarded. One extremely disabling thing in France (and, no doubt, more generally in Europe) is that there does not seem to be any alternative for society other than, on the one hand, an ultra-liberal destructive privatization which doesn't give a hoot for those countless people who don't figure in the statistics, and on the other, an appeal to state protection under the sign of extended provision. It's as if society had lost all ability to organize itself, to generate its own values, its own richness and material, other than participation in the market (whether European or the world). In any case, the least one can say today is that this blocking of a social alternative has two poles: the affirmation of ultra-liberalism and the defence of the welfare state manifests in every way the same acceptance of the everlastingness of the system, stopped from casting any real doubts, beyond a simple pin prick, on the fatal march of 'progress'. And yet I will not be the last to draw whatever benefits I can from the state. These exist so autonomously from society, from the will of the people - a monstrous bureaucracy - that the sanest relationship one can still have with it is not to hesitate to profit, where possible, from its ungainliness and blindness. To demand a just return, whether in maintaining the gains of wage earners or, from the recruitment of new aides, or to profit from the bureaucratic shortcomings of the system is one thing. But it definitely does not constitute a point of departure for a reversal of perspective in social life. Far from it.

It was pleasurable obviously to see economic activity reduced to a crawl for several weeks and feel that its smooth functioning corresponded to a form of slavery, to a general stupefaction. To a certain extent, the massive mobilization in the streets restored confidence because one could see it was possible to resist, to refuse new austerity measures and to effectively oppose the authoritarian decisions of experts. The expression of a mass of people, of the average French person, that is a poor person, confirmed the possibility of a return to pressure in the streets which the movement against the CIP in the spring of '94 had already signified clearly. When it came to a return to work people dragged their feet. With sectors continuing to remain on strike, one saw that the outcome of the conflict, pensions and unwritten guarantees, satisfied no one. Defiance persists and the atmosphere is one of readiness in the event of negotiations fouling up. One last point in

favour of this type of strike movement in our times is the extreme fragility of the economy confronted with a transport stoppage. After a few weeks of strikes the whole system grinds to a halt. All firms lose money on a vast scale and are economically asphyxiated. It is more than ever a solid basis on which to make a practical critique, the problems remaining being those of clarity of critique and effective solidarity with strikers who still rely a lot on trade union organization.

On the last point it doesn't amount much to unreservedly enthuse about the force of the movement when one sees how the beginning of a vital public debate, experienced as such, was so easily eaten away, often disarmed by slogans and ready-made ideas.

Reflection has not managed to effectively break the vicious circle of obsession with employment and purchasing power, the imagination of people always seeming to stumble over the vision of social struggle. Finally, the impression is of a movement which attacks the real enemy, the absolutism of money, without finding its true voice to speak about a general situation and which remains clouded by a still corporatist language. The protest has not fulfilled its promise, thus leaving the field open to trade union experts and government specialists skilled at a 'realistic' negotiation concerning benefits and who won't risk changing anything making up life's mediocrity and misery.

#### Provisional end to the state of things.

1. The particular system in place at the SNCF forces on-track workers into retirement at 50 and others at 55, while elsewhere the retiring age for some years had been at least 60 following a lengthening of contributions imposed on the private sector under the pretext of course of competition and profitability to 40 years in place of 37.5.

2. It is necessary to clarify some features of the French social security system. Up to now the system has been directed at once by the state and by the unions, FO essentially, with in second place, representatives of management. The state had, to be sure, determined the general orientation, the overall budget, the rules concerning the repayment of debt and regulated the structure in general but which was financed by wage earners on the one hand and firms on the other. And, in fact at the level of the regional funds, the trade union FO, so steadfastly opposed to reform, had power over budget decisions and was free to make important appointments. It is necessary to establish whether or not the system is still very indebted, many people including economic experts suspecting and even accusing the state of having taken certain important moneys out of the social security account, which they should have taken from other sources. Thus the state now had no bother pointing to the debt which it could largely have contributed to and created by abusing its decision making powers. Through the reform, social security would be fiscalized, that is financed entirely from taxes and therefore would fall wholly and exclusively under the control of the state, requiring an annual parliamentary debate before making major decisions, particularly budgetary ones (obligatory democracy). In fact the masters have to change which might appear of little consequence. In fact it is nothing of the sort because the trade union representatives who participated in its management actually immobilized the system for years and therefore kept its evolution in check (i.e. submitting completely to criteria of profitability) without having the foggiest idea how to improve it. And in any case, all governments not daring to confront the inevitable discontent were, up to now, afraid to countenance a general reform that solely privileged the profitability of the system and the sums involved. Rocard, the leftist minister, had prepared the movement, Juppé had jumped into the driving seat.

FO: *Force Ouvrier*. A trade union traditionally little to the fore of militant workers' struggles with a strong presence in corporate



branches like prison officers, social security but barely represented in the SNCF, or the sorting offices.

CGT: *Confédération Générale du Travail*. The union traditionally linked to the Communist Party but over the last ten years more concerned with purely trade union matters than political ones following the gradual weakening of the French Communist Party. It

has a tradition of participating in militant workers' struggles which it has made its business to control somewhat. It is still relatively influential in statist sectors like the SNCF and the metro, but generally it is weakening and for some ten years it has gone from a predominant position in industry to the position of a simple constituent - hardly more important than others in a parcellized French trade unionism.

## On the Eve of Battle

In spite of the hopes it raised, the strike movement that began to develop from the end of November to mid-December 1995 hadn't anything revolutionary to it. The announcement of a new round of negotiations and possible conflict between the unions and government after Chirac's election to the head of the French state had anticipated the defensive stance, on the part of the workers, against the agreement over measures dictated by the World Bank, the IMF and their flunkies in a technocratic Europe.

No one was deceived: the key word of the strikers was 'liars' as regards Juppé and cohorts. These people have scarcely the demeanour and talent to allow the poor to dream whilst continuing to enfeeble them. Mitterand is dead and his style has followed him. Chirac got himself elected on promises which lasted less than the illusions.

Right from the moment a government assumed power co-opted by the preceding one<sup>6</sup> and international finance, the official French Mafia had decided that its financial protectors had to be first served. One recognized the master from a slave by their priorities.

The reform of the social security system, the Juppé plan, had followed the raising of taxes. Under the pretext of an imbalance in the accounts, made up and unverifiable, the technocrats had drawn out of their briefcases a bag of measures destined, on the one hand, to reduce to the lowest denominator the growing level of retirement pensions (alignment of the so called public sector with the private) and, on the other, to tax poverty (the means testing of the family allowance, RDS<sup>7</sup> etc.).

Under the domination of the economy the majority of individuals have been stripped of the faculty of simple analysis. Not being able to write, people have learned how to add up, and when the bill is wrong, it is reason itself which is brought into question.

'The nobility of the state' (in the words of the sociologist Bourdieu), the estate holders of this democracy in its death throes, has burdened the mass of the population with a state debt whose benefits they alone are in receipt of. They went about cashing in on their situation with the same ruthlessness as a boss exploits his workers. The despicable and arrogant greed of a government casting aside all legitimacy had provoked a movement of waged workers limited to the defence of what exists.

After 20 years of social disintegration which shaped the working class in France, the state which, in the era of Mitterand, had substituted culture for social links,<sup>8</sup> found itself faced with tenacious resistance, in workplaces where a solidarity of conditions is a mode of acknowledgement. The railworkers began: employees belonging to the metro, the electricity industry, telecom and the Post Office joined in the dance. In the regions, municipal employees joined in the mêlée and it was precisely there, far from the capital, that the most intensely lived experience occurred. There, the strikers, their neighbours and people generally acted in solidarity using their time and their proximity to encounter one another, discuss, have a ball, criticizing this world before remaking it for themselves.

In spite of the near total paralysis of all the means of transport, good humour tinged with the perfume of an at times pronounced resignation, had won out over the bitterness exuded by managerial bastards. Such was its consistency, the mood so widespread that if people stood up and refused further humiliations, it was for the good of all, as much as for themselves. Poor people

living on their knees but in search of vengeance and have a jealous regard for those who say no.

At the heart of the different sectors, the hierarchies, abasing themselves to a fault, and rightly disturbed, were under pressure to carry out their next function: to disappear.<sup>9</sup> Except for some aborted attempts to get the trains running, some buses and tubes, cadres and other flunkies did not intervene hoping to benefit from the beneficial financial consequences of a conflict which, in the beginning, did not threaten them.<sup>10</sup> In the Post Office (PTT) as in the electricity industry (EDF-GDF), the matter was treated with less 'managerial politeness'. Parallel sorting offices were opened, defended by security guards to deal with the former, and for the latter, punitive sanctions accompanied by lay-offs and court cases.

Except in Marseilles there wasn't any significant conflict. Going on strike two weeks after the start, the Marseilles train drivers found themselves isolated when other sectors resumed work. The municipal council of Marseilles linked up with the RTM (*Regionale Transporte Marseilles*) to decide, counting on an apparent weakness, to send cops against the workers. It wasn't a good idea because the strikers hardened until they gained a provisional concession.

The CGT-CFDT-FO-FSU unions called for four big days of local and regional demonstrations which took place at an accelerated tempo of sorts to stop the emergence of other forms of action which could have escaped their control. Whilst reducing the subversive risk of an absence of demands, the planned demonstrations, in spite of everything, were to the good of people who, up to then, had neglected to seek in the occasion a basis on which to begin to do something together.

At the conclusion of demonstrations, notably in Toulouse and Nantes, there was a ritual clash which smashed the harmonic decor and left the terrain open to the enemy.<sup>11</sup> The time gained by the state to desocialize individuals was not made good by an ephemeral barricade of litter bins. On the contrary, the isolated violence brought home how powerless they were to reconquer the territory of encounter, and fed the state's imprisoning bulimia.<sup>12</sup>

Although latent, the tension between unions and strikers, evident during the 1986-87 conflict in the SNCF (the French railways strike) were not apparent and have not yet been revived. The railway strike began on the 22nd of November without prior warning and union approval in the majority of places threatened with closure by the state-SNCF plan.

Feeling the anger mount and not having the initiative, the trade union organizations decided to support the strikers; the unanimity at the base of the strikes was such that the unions could only accompany the movement and seek to contain its development.

The Stalinist old guard had nearly disappeared from the ranks of the CGT to be replaced by 'Bolshevik' militants less aware of bureaucratic manoeuvres or wage arbitration and the necessity of power sharing. The same applied to the militant wing of the CFDT where libertarian currents jostled delightfully. These young bureaucrats are not yet worn down by lying and about turns, nor unmasked by the betrayal inherent in their function: tell me who you associate with and I shall tell you what you are.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, internal trade union conflicts are expressions of factional rivalries sharing the same ambitions. This endemic quarrel is to be seen at the approach of elections to union office but this time



it was between unions. The sincerity of individuals employed by these organizations is not proof of their honesty but of their blindness. The rottenest practised a similar sort of opportunism culminating in a show of scorn for the non-unionized, who have nothing to gain from the commerce of waged misery; for the traffic in poverty wages there was nothing on offer.<sup>3</sup>

Prior to haggling over the remains of a movement they could not lead, the trade union crew presented a united front. The unity proclaimed from the top was the inevitable result of alliances brought about by lower ranking militants, in the course of daily assemblies, which had the dual function of keeping the strikers under-informed and voting for the continuation of the strike.

The possibility of transforming these open assemblies into forums where the free exchange of views could flower was scarcely more concrete. Happily, uniformity did not reign across their entirety, but geographical differences were cruelly felt. People discussed more (providing material and financial support) on the forecourt of Bayonne station or in Parisian stations, where the perplexing *Vigipirate* plan made access to meeting places difficult.<sup>4</sup>

Pickets and the occupation of SNCF premises often allowed ideas to be expressed which surpassed the assemblyist consensus: the return of the repressed swept aside the omnipresent bureaucratic mantras.

Between the never ending 'never again like before' numerous poems, quotations and scant consolation:

*'We begin to live when we retire,  
We join battle and open fire,  
Juppé - we ain't no whores,  
You'll be fucked by our struggle and cause.'*

Prominently, flanking a roll call of scabs:

*'Annihilate forever everything that can screw  
up your-movement'.*

(Depot de Paris Saint-Lazare)

The gradual 'resumption' of work which, at times, was stormy, was not due to trade union ploys as was often the case in the past. Tiredness, exhaustion, lack of money, the announcement that some reforms were to be frozen contributed to ending the strikes. The most pessimistic strikers were unhappy about the fact that the movement was not generalized: They ignored the degree of control attained by the domesticating power of liberalism. Many who wanted to continue were filled with bitterness, rage and nausea when the strikes were called off. They did not wish to break the bonds that had united them with others for three weeks and create division to the possible detriment of friendships formed and the social adventures to come. Everyone agreed on a pause to recover breath and to critically examine the movement.

It is imperative to understand its deficiencies, its qualities and limits because the state will not go back on its decisions.

To reflect is not to yield.

A railway proletarian  
Paris, January 17 1996.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Title of both a leaflet distributed in the movement and an article in the recent French edition of *Echanges et Mouvement*.

<sup>2</sup> Doctrine which justifies predatory relations between individuals.

<sup>3</sup> A very widespread ideology which opposes a literal to a real meaning of democracy.

<sup>4</sup> Sporadic demonstrations happened in neighbourhoods outside of official ones.

<sup>5</sup> This even extends to the timetable itself. The more useful the borrowed indexed timetable, the more expensive it is - a process already in force in the TGV and which it is intended to apply generally.

<sup>6</sup> Normally in French politics there is a formal separation between the election of the Presidency and the previous government and its Prime Minister. For the first time, however, this pretence was dropped, as the whole government had already been chosen by the previous administration (both of them Gaullist, though before Chirac, Mitterand, a 'Socialist', had been nominally Head of State).

<sup>7</sup> Increased national insurance contributions of 3.5 per cent.

<sup>8</sup> For example, nationally organized state-subsidized free music festivals, usually several days long and mostly held in the streets in every town throughout France.

<sup>9</sup> This refers to the fact that these cadres, unlike in '86-7 when they fully participated in the repression and scabbing of the railworkers' strike, were themselves threatened with redundancy by the latest State reforms.

<sup>10</sup> It's of no importance to us to have found out that some cadres, or even high functionaries, participated in the demos and the strikes! How far does this go, this team spirit of which these managers speak, these high level scabs who break most movements and then change their tune when it's their arse that's threatened.

<sup>11</sup> A largely marginal pro-situ/autonomist milieu tend, in France, to go on demos in order to wait for the end when they have a traditional stone-throwing, window-smashing, conflict with the cops, maybe overthrowing a car or two. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this, but it has no strategy behind it and doesn't arise out of the rest of the demo; the vast majority of demonstrators aren't touched by it. It's largely a voluntaristic affair which doesn't develop from the concerns and anger of the vast majority, who remain, and are treated as, spectators of this predictable reflex punch up; it doesn't subvert marginality, but tends to reinforce it. The media and the State exaggerate these conflicts in order to be that much more repressive with those arrested.

<sup>12</sup> A reference to the fact that French prisons are being stuffed to bursting point.

<sup>13</sup> These people spend half their time in the CGT and the CFDT offices.

<sup>14</sup> According to the latest news, SNCF management have increased the amount payable to striking union delegates. It has always deliberately confused bureaucratic dialogue with social dialogue. Union delegates have for ages only represented a handful of wage workers.

<sup>15</sup> The plan drawn up under the pretext of combating Islamic terrorism resulted in a vast increase in CCTV cameras, the presence of the army and *gendarmérie* everywhere and secret access codes on gates to places where assemblies had been held in the '86-7 strike.





# Escape from the 'Law of Value'?

In *Aufheben* 3 (Summer 1994), we reviewed *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-92*, a collection of articles from the American autonomist journals *Zerowork* (1974-9) and *Midnight Notes* (1979-). We welcomed the book and the tradition which it expresses; in asserting the primacy of the class struggle, the Midnight Notes collective present a vital alternative to objectivist Leninist theories of imperialism in understanding such events as the Gulf War. However, we were ultimately critical of the book, arguing for example that it appeared to grasp the dynamic of modern capitalism simply in terms of the power of capital to (deliberately) manipulate prices to attack the working class. Below, we publish a reply to our review, from one of the editors of *Midnight Oil*. And below that we have our counter-reply, in which we argue that the position(s) developed in *Midnight Oil*, and re-affirmed in the editor's reply, fail to take sufficient account of the mediations that constitute capital's operation through the 'law of value'.

## A reply to *Aufheben's* review of *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-92* by George Caffentzis

*Aufheben*, v.a. irr. lift (up), pick up; keep, preserve;  
(laws) repeal, abolish; (agreements) rescind, annul;  
(philosophy) overcoming, preservation.

These remarks are personal responses to a review of a book entitled *Midnight Oil: Work Energy, War, 1973-1992* which appeared in an English-language journal entitled *Aufheben* in 1994. I am responding to the *Aufheben* review because I am one of the editors of *Midnight Oil* and because the review was lengthy and very critical. Its thesis is this: 'It is not merely that we find *Midnight Oil* is inconsistent, as is only to be expected from a collective project developing over 20 years, rather it is that we find its underlying theory incoherent.' I will argue that the 'underlying theory' is not incoherent and that the arguments the *Aufheben* reviewer uses to prove *Midnight Oil's* theory incoherent are not sound because the views attributed to the Midnight Notes collective are simply not its views. In other words, the *Aufheben* reviewer has read *Midnight Oil* wrong-headedly.

Who is to blame for this misreading, if that is what it is, the authors or the readers or both? Here let me take on a bit of *mea culpa* for the Midnight Notes editorial collective. The text of *Midnight Oil* is a strange and complex animal. The first part deals directly with the Gulf War and with aspects of the petroleum extraction and refining industry internationally during the 1980s. Its purpose was to describe and explain why the war (with or without quotation marks) happened as it did. Parts two and three include articles from *Zerowork I* (1975) and issues of *Midnight Notes* from 1979 to 1990 whose purpose is to trace the development both of that period's class relations in general and of the theory the Midnight Notes collective uses to explain the Gulf War. But the development implies contradiction and some later articles (especially 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse') were clearly in a polemic with earlier ones (especially 'Notes on the International Crisis'). All this happens without much stage direction for the reader. The only place where there is some reflection on the whole project is in the Introduction and there the accent is on the continuity and coherence of the book's articles, although the difference between *Zerowork* and the Midnight Notes collectives is noted.

Thus the reader who notices a contradiction between articles in *Midnight Oil* has some work to do for him/herself. The reader has to ask and answer the questions: 'Is the contradiction a

sign of theoretical incoherence or of theoretical development? Is it a sign of a plain confusion or of an *aufheben* (i.e., a repealing and a preserving)?" Is this too much to ask of a reader? Not necessarily, if the reader is a member of a collective that calls itself 'Aufheben' (even ironically). I will show that at a number of points the *Aufheben* reader-reviewer did not ask him/herself these questions and simply assumed the worst, for reasons that are not clear to me.

The clearest example of this failure has to do with the notion of value. In the *Aufheben* review's section on 'Value and the Apocalypse', the reviewers note that there is a rather obvious contradiction between 'Notes on the International Crisis' and 'The Work Energy/ Crisis and the Apocalypse'. The second article clearly rejects the first article's view that capitalism has entered into a period of 'labourless production liberating capital from labour as a value-producing activity'. The reviewer did not note that the first article appeared in *Zerowork I* in 1975 and the second in *Midnight Notes* #3 in 1980. In fact, he/she assumes a continuity of views even when there is an explicit rejection of such continuity in the later article, which the reviewer notes! But she/he continues to claim that the 'underlying theory' of Midnight Notes abandons the 'law of value' when in *Midnight Oil* article after article, from beginning (p. xiv: 'Despite all its high-tech machines, space shuttles, laser beam weapons and genetic engineering, capital still depends upon human work') to end (p. 326: 'How can we understand anything about this world without using the axioms of Marx's theory of work, money and profit?') the application of this law forms the basis of explanation.

Our interest, has not been in swearing allegiance to 'the Law' but to show how capital is even more constrained by it at the end of the twentieth century than it was in the nineteenth. The most important consequence of this constraint is that any increase in the capitalization of the highly mechanized industries (such as the nuclear power industry and the petroleum extraction and refining industry) must be accompanied by a major increase in unmechanized, 'wretch' and 'housework' labour. That is why computerization and robotization must be accompanied by a major increase in sweatshops and slavery, i.e., the expansion of areas of absolute surplus value and unwaged labour. This theme has been repeated so often in Midnight Notes writing that it is hard to believe that any reader can mistake it, even if he/she disagreed with it, as the *Aufheben* reviewers certainly do.



The reviewer also argues (a bit incoherently) that Midnight Notes collective uses the law of value incorrectly, since the petroleum industry is not a high organic composition industry and that the proper analysis of oil price is through seeing it as a product of rent. This is not the place to deal with the matter of organic composition at length but a glance at page 237 of *Midnight Oil* will



show that the derivation of the three sectors of industry organized by the ratio of invested capital to wages was empirically based. Anyway, if the collective was empirically wrong, then the *Aufheben* reviewer should show us some numbers. As for the rent analysis of the oil price, it is not that Midnight Notes did not consider it, but it was rejected as a minor aspect of the story. The idea that a few oil sheikhs' and autocrats' 'property rights' determined such a vital commodity's price was hard to believe in the context of the increasing marginalization of rental income with the development of capital in the twentieth century. This is especially the case with former colonial nations which are being recolonized in new ways at this very moment. As I wrote in 'Rambo on the Barbary Shore': 'For the US state considers itself the custodian for world capital of the planet's energy resources, whether these residues of geologic evolution happen to be immediately below US territory or not... "Libyan terrorism" is simply the belief that the petroleum resources locked in the Libyans' soil is theirs. Such presumption is intolerable, according to the present capitalist order' (pp. 292, 294). One might agree or disagree with these expressions, but they hardly constitute neglect of the question of rent.

Disagreement is one thing, but the inability to read what one is disagreeing with is another. Therefore, it is not surprising that some other elements of 'incoherence' in *Midnight Oil* the *Aufheben* reviewer claims to see are also cases of *her/his* disagreement with the Midnight Notes position presented as Midnight Notes' own confusion (*N.B.*: don't mingle aufhebens, please). Let me take them in order: (1) the importance of energy commodities in the present period of capitalist accumulation, (2) the way in which capitalists plan, strategize, and conspire, (3) Midnight Notes' predictions concerning the Gulf War made in October of 1990, (4) the role of class struggle as the major variable in historical analysis.

Is it true, as the *Aufheben* reviewer contends, that 'Midnight Notes contends, that the history of post-war capitalism is the history of oil price changes?' (my italics). No, it is not, as a reading of the *full* title of the book - *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* - and even a superficial reading of chapter headings and random paragraphs throughout the book would indicate. 'Work', 'energy' and 'war' are clearly as important as 'oil' in the book's conceptual economy, while its *dramatis personae* include not only roughnecks and Exxon executives. Autoworkers, coal miners, nuclear power technicians, housewives and communal farmers are as central to *Midnight Oil's* history of post-war capitalism as are people formerly connected with the oil industry.

Why then does the *Aufheben* reviewer mistakenly claim that Midnight Notes collective 'attempt[s] to reduce the history of capitalism to the history of oil price fluctuations'? My most charitable explanation is as follows. Knowledge of the role of energy commodities and their prices, especially petroleum, play in class relations is crucial for the understanding of the post-war history of capitalism. This is not an insight especially given to Midnight Notes, it is contemporary common sense. This knowledge is especially important in explaining the Gulf War of 1990-91 which was fought, literally, on, over and within oil wells, pipelines, terminals and refineries. Since *Midnight Oil* is a book aiming to explain the main characteristics of the Gulf War through the application of class analysis, oil *qua* commodity and its price had to be the central topic of the book.

Further, the Midnight Notes collective has argued more generally that with the demise of a Keynesian strategy - which focused class struggle in the mass assembly line factories making 'consumer durables' - the centre of gravity of class relations shifted to basic commodities that are essential to both capitalist production and the reproduction of the working class. Energy commodities, especially petroleum, are the most basic of the basic commodities. Consequently, changes in the prices of such commodities penetrate all nodes of the commodity field and are obviously crucial for understanding the history of post-1973 capitalism.

Finally, there is the question of prices. Midnight Notes is not alone in arguing that all the prices of commodities are determined by socio-political struggle. It is the starting point of the critique of political economy both logically and historically. After all, prices of commodities, especially prices of their production, reflect (1) the existence of exploitable labour (hence the continually renewed, violent expropriation of workers from the means of subsistence), (2) the struggle over the value of workers' labour power (indeed, often the establishment of the existence of such value in the first place) in the production of the commodity, (3) the struggle over the surplus value extracted during the production of the commodity (involving battles over length and intensity of the work day), (4) the transferring in or out of the total surplus value generated by the capitalist system as a whole in order to determine the price of production (which



involves the global accumulated struggles of capital and proletariat in all aspects of production).

Though these geological strata of class struggle can be found in the prices of all commodities, they are especially evident in commodities on the top and bottom of the production tree - i.e., in branches where there is a very high or a very low machinery/direct labour ratio. This is so because the global social character of capital is made most evident in these branches. Energy commodities, especially those produced in the nuclear or petroleum cycle, are on the higher branches, and so their prices reflect the indices of struggle throughout the system.

Taking these aspects of oil prices as essential to *Midnight Oil's* analysis, it would certainly be wrong to say that *Midnight Notes* reduces the history of capitalism to oil price fluctuations, as the *Aufheben* reviewer charges. The most accurate claim one can make is that *Midnight Notes* interprets major changes in oil prices in the 1973-1992 as indices and complex reflections of class struggles throughout the world capitalist system. This too is not such a wild view. The problem is to provide such an interpretation. *Midnight Oil* sketches a narrative that attempts to explain basic inflections in the oil price from the early 1970s to the early 1990s. The particular narrative might be crude and full of gaps. It certainly does not claim to be necessarily true. Other, perhaps better, narratives are possible and I look forward to studying them. But one thing that *Midnight Notes's* approach does is to show how the most dispossessed and apparently wretched people of the planet have changed capitalism and are putting its hegemony in question on the most basic level. The narrative satisfies a minimum condition from my perspective, for any correct understanding of oil price changes or any other important feature of the history of capitalism.

The *Aufheben* reviewer certainly finds fault with particulars of the *Midnight Oil* narrative, but more importantly s/he sees a deeper logical flaw in it: the conflation of 'capitalism with the actions of individual capitalists' for '*Midnight Oil* is fatally undermined by *Midnight Notes's* tendency to ascribe outcomes to the conscious strategy of a unified capital.' In a word, the *Midnight Notes* collective commits a fallacy of composition - by arguing that since individual capitalists have strategies, then capital as a whole has a strategy - which leads it to hold a simplistic and vacuous 'conspiracy theory'.

Here again I argue that the reader has misread the work. First, since the *Aufheben* reviewer recognizes the *Midnight Notes* collective's efforts to read working class action as a determining element in the analysis of any recent historical event or tendency, then surely *Midnight Oil* cannot be ascribing outcomes to the conscious strategy of a unified capital, any more than an outcome can be ascribed to a conscious unified proletarian strategy. So in a war, the victory of side A cannot be ascribed to A's actions and strategy alone, the actions of Side B and its strategy for victory must be included in any account of the victory itself. Since almost every important feature of capitalism is rife with struggles, then any outcome cannot be ascribed to a single strategy. The *Midnight Notes* collective certainly does not believe in the myth of an absolute, omnipotent totality called capital determining values, prices and profits round the planet. That God was never born, it need hardly be killed by *Midnight Notes* or *Aufheben*!

Second, what of the fallacy of the composition retort: 'Capitalism does not have a strategy, although individual capitalists pursue different strategies'? We should remind the *Aufheben* reviewer that not every inference from parts to whole is illegitimate. For example, though 'Each atom in this piece of chalk is indivisible.

Therefore, the chalk is indivisible' is a fallacious argument, 'Every atom in this piece of chalk has mass. Therefore, the piece of chalk has mass' is not. What of capitals and strategies? Let our reviewer attend: there may be a genuine *aufheben* lurking here. For individual capitals and capitalists are not merely mutually repulsive identities, they form a system and a class. Can this system and class, though not conscious, have a strategy? Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, Foucault and many others have taught us that strategies need not have self-conscious, Cartesian subjects owning them. Certainly individual capitalists have collective interests (prime among them 'the intensity of exploitation of the sum total of labour by the sum total of capital') and they embody these 'freemason'-like interests in ever more elaborate organizational forms, beginning with mercantile combinations within a city (as noted by Smith) and ending in the most refined international coordinating bodies like the IMF, the World Bank and the W.T.O. (prefigured in the writing of Saint-Simon). But even in the absence of any formal organizational form, one can ascribe a strategy (tacitly, as Locke would say) to capitalists operating collectively. Is this logically improper, fallacious or incoherent? Not necessarily. Is it useful? Perhaps, if it helps in describing, explaining, predicting and retrodicting our history.

The matter of prediction and retrodiction brings us, finally, to the *Midnight Notes* pamphlet, *When Crusaders and Assassins Unite, Let The People Beware*, quickly written in September and October 1990, as an intervention in the anti-war debate in the US which tended to be hysterical and/or apocalyptic at times. The pamphlet tried to soberly describe, explain and predict the outcome of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the US/UN response months before the shooting started and stopped. The *Aufheben* reviewer begins and ends the review with this pamphlet and gives the impression that it was a total failure and a proof of the 'incoherence' of *Midnight Oil's* 'underlying theory'. But this assessment is off the mark. Indeed, the following facts - the actual outcome of the war (which led to a *status quo ante* as far as the governments of Iraq and Kuwait are concerned), the elaborate backroom monetary dealings between the Hussein regime and the Bush administration preceding the invasion, the permanent stationing of the US military in the Gulf, the ability of the Iraqi military to remain intact and destroy the southern 'Shiite' and northern 'Kurdish' rebellions, the US government's application of 'marginal [instead of absolute] military force', and the refusal of the US to fight 'a large-scale, conventional shooting war' - were correctly predicted or retrodicted by the pamphlet. Of course, the pamphlet was sketchy and *ad hoc*, but it was the starting point of *Midnight Notes* collective's year-long study of the background of the war which eventually led to the writing of Part 1 of *Midnight Oil*.

Surely, it shouldn't be surprising that this study would have led to a deepening of our analysis of the Gulf War, especially in allowing us to see its connection to the Debt Crisis and the New Enclosures. Nor should the construction of a more complex analysis of the game played by the major capitalist players among each other, separately, and of the struggle they fought against the oil-producing proletariat, collectively, be surprising either. Somehow the *Aufheben* reviewer wants to blame the *Midnight Notes* collective for studying the issues more thoroughly and putting forth more complex hypotheses on the basis of this study. I really do not understand *their* game in this regard.

Let me end this reply by responding to *Aufheben's* broadest criticism of the book with a brief observation. The reviewers claim that the *Midnight Notes* collective 'overemphasize[s] class struggle' and does not understand the importance of capitalist competition on



the world market. If Midnight Notes would just tone down that struggle bass and amplify the competition melody, then perhaps they would play more agreeably, the *Aufheben* critic suggests. But this suggestion implies a parallelism between class struggle and capitalist competition, i.e., competition is intra-class antagonism while class struggle is inter- class antagonism. Are competition and class struggle just parts of a larger Hobbesian field of human antagonism? No. Competition operates by the rules of the capitalist game, within a given mathematical framework of risk and probability, and it helps determine the average rate of profit inside the system. Class struggle questions the very rules of the game (and so operates on a meta-level

immediately), its mathematics is one of chance and possibility, and it results in the total surplus value that competition presupposes.

Midnight Notes is interested in action that violates the rules of capital, that opens up new possibilities and that reduces the total surplus value; *that* is the music the collective tries to hear and to play. Do we hear it, all of it, do we play it right? That is our problem. Does competition exist and is it important? Of course. But you don't need to open your window 'round midnight to hear *that* stuff.

Portland, Maine  
December, 1994





## A response to Caffentzis

In his reply, Caffentzis puts forward a seemingly formidable defence against our criticisms, the centrepiece of which is his insistence that in our review we have seriously misread *Midnight Oil*. We believe this warrants a considered response, which we hope will serve both to clarify and to refine our criticisms of *Midnight Oil*. Before responding directly to the points raised by Caffentzis, we should perhaps begin by placing our critical review of *Midnight Oil* in the broader context of how we see our relation to the work of the Midnight Notes and Zerowork collectives.

In devoting space to a lengthy review article of *Midnight Oil* we did not merely seek to highlight a counter-argument to the prevalent Leninist or liberal perspectives on the Gulf War and 'imperialism'; nor did we merely seek to review critically a work that is influential amongst political circles with which we are engaged - although either of these reasons would have perhaps been sufficient in themselves. We did not hesitate to review *Midnight Oil* because we have had a long-standing respect and sympathy for the work of both Zerowork and Midnight Notes over the years. We have all, at one stage or another, been captivated by the audacious leaps of logic which, in drawing together so apparently disparate elements, broke free from the stultifying confines of orthodox Marxism; and we have all been inspired by the assertion of the primacy of class subjectivity and the political centrality of the 'refusal of work'. This is perhaps particularly true of Zerowork, whose path-breaking work in the 1970s seemed to grasp the salient features of the crisis of Keynesianism and the post-war settlements that were just erupting at the time.

Unfortunately times change. In the 1970s, state intervention in the economy had become increasingly frantic in the face of a growing working class militancy across the world. In such circumstances, the notion of two conflicting class strategies, around which the analysis of Zerowork revolved, seemed to have considerable credence. But since then capital has restructured. The 'law of value' has everywhere been reimposed by the increasing international fluidity of capital which has been able to outflank the old bastions of working class power. With the rise of unbridled global finance markets, the power of the nation state to consciously plan and regulate capital has declined.

This change in circumstances has brought with it important political implications for the interpretation of the two strategies theory that had been developed during the proletarian offensive of the 1960s and 70s. On the one hand, with the retreat of the working class throughout much of Europe and America, many autonomists have simply sat round waiting for the materialization (or immaterialization as Negri might have it) of a 'new social subject', or else latched on uncritically to any half-baked liberal or nationalist struggle as a sign of the resurgence of a working class strategy. On the other hand, many erstwhile revolutionaries, in the face of working class retreat, have slipped down the slope to conspiracy theories and concluded that capital is omnipotent and able to impose its strategy almost at will.

In these changed circumstances, the weaknesses of the work of both Zerowork and Midnight Notes have come to the fore. Their audacious leaps of logic now appear all too cavalier. As a consequence, we have felt it necessary to try to move beyond the positions of Zerowork and Midnight Notes, without in the process falling back into the objectivism of orthodox Marxism. To do this it

has been necessary to critically reconsider their work to see what must be preserved, at the same time as retrieving those useful aspects of traditional Marxism, which in their over-exuberance, they have thrown overboard.

This then is our work of 'aufheben', and it is in this light that we approached the review of *Midnight Oil*. Caffentzis, however, argues that we failed to recognize the development and process of 'aufheben' within *Midnight Oil* itself. Caffentzis insists that with the reaffirmation of the 'law of value' the later writings of the Midnight Notes collective stands in opposition to that of the earlier writings of Zerowork which had rejected the continuing validity of this law. Indeed, for Caffentzis, some of these later writings should be read as nothing short of a polemic against the excessive positions first put forward within the pages of Zerowork. For Caffentzis, what we see as incoherence is in fact the contradictory process of 'aufheben' at work in the very pages of *Midnight Oil*, bringing together as it does fifteen years of theoretical development.

However, Caffentzis does admit that the Introduction overemphasizes the continuity of the various articles that make up *Midnight Oil*, and, as a consequence, fails to point out the contradictory process of development that had occurred over these fifteen odd years in which they were written. We would say this is a serious omission, particularly for readers who can only be unaware of the internal debates within the Midnight Notes and Zerowork collectives which presumably occurred more than a decade ago. However, we would be the first to concede that such an omission is perhaps understandable given the political imperative to present a distinct and unified intervention in the debates surrounding the Gulf War and its aftermath.

Also, in his reply, Caffentzis clarifies certain important points. Not only does he underline the reaffirmation of Marx's theory of value in his own and the contemporary writings of the Midnight Notes collective, he also makes clear his understanding of the concept of strategy. As he states:

*For individual capitals and capitalists are not mutually repulsive entities, they form a system and a class. Can this system and class, though not conscious have a strategy? Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, Foucault and many others have taught us that strategies need not have self-conscious, Cartesian subjects owning them.*

So it would seem, for Caffentzis, capital does not have a conscious strategy as such. The 'strategy' of capital as a whole emerges out of the conflicting and competing strategies of individual capitals and their agencies such that, with hindsight, it appears as if it possessed a conscious strategy. With all this we can only concur. It would seem that we have indeed misread *Midnight Oil* - or that we have at least been guilty of interpreting it in the worst possible light.

But have we misread *Midnight Oil*? If we look at *Midnight Oil* again we find that nowhere is this crucial notion of strategy made clear, not even as an aside. Throughout *Midnight Oil*, whether in the earlier or later articles, the 'as if' is elided. Indeed, in all the historical narratives that we find in *Midnight Oil*, capital appears as a predetermined totality possessing a conscious strategy whose only limit and problem is the counter-strategy of the working class. Even the most assiduous reader would find it hard put to discover



Caffentzis's sophisticated notion of strategy in the pages of *Midnight Oil*, let alone discern a change in position on this point between its earlier and later articles.

So what of Caffentzis's reaffirmation of Marx's theory of value? Clearly there is a major change of position between the later writings of *Midnight Notes* and the earlier writings of the Zerowork collective. We would be the first to admit that *Midnight Notes* and Caffentzis make important points regarding the continuing importance of Marx's labour theory of value but we still think their account is ultimately inadequate. We shall argue that Caffentzis and *Midnight Notes* fail to really break from the earlier writings of Zerowork on this question and this is why they are unable to clarify the notion of two strategies in their historical narratives. This perhaps becomes clear once we consider Caffentzis's treatment of the question of rent.

The problem of rent was central in the development of Marx's theory of value, and would seem to be of vital importance for anyone concerned with the formation of the price of a natural resource such as oil.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as we noted in our review, *Midnight Oil* ignores the whole question of rent in their account of the determination of oil prices.<sup>2</sup>

In his reply Caffentzis simply dismisses the relevance of rent theory on what seems to be two grounds. First he asserts that, in general, rent is no longer significant in the determination and regulation of prices. Of course it can be argued that, with the development of capitalism, more and more of production is subordinated to the capitalist production process and as such capital comes to directly produce more and more of its own inputs. As a consequence, capital is able to escape its dependence on non-produced natural resources and thereby undermine the material basis for the existence of a distinct class of landowners whose ownership of natural resources allow them to pocket surplus-profits as rent.

But this is only an abstract tendency. It in no way means that rent is no longer significant, any more than the tendency for production to be automated means that we have now reached the stage that labour is no longer the measure of value!<sup>3</sup> If nothing else rent still remains vitally important in particular sectors and industries. For example, how can we possibly understand the issue of housing or the capitalist organization of urban space without reference to a theory of rent? And perhaps more pertinently, how are we to explain the pricing of oil in terms of a labour theory of value without reference to a theory of rent?

This brings us to Caffentzis's second grounds for dismissing the need to consider rent. In the particular case of oil, Caffentzis simply argues that it is absurd to think that the property rights of a few sheikhs can be allowed to interfere in the determination of such a strategic commodity as oil. For Caffentzis, although it may appear that the oil is owned by these sheikhs, or Middle Eastern governments, it is really owned by the USA. But oil is not simply owned, even formally, by a 'few sheikhs'. The oil is owned by governments who not only garner vast revenues from their ownership of oil but also possess some of the most formidable armed forces in the world. What is more, it is from these rights of ownership that some of the most powerful multinationals in the world - the major oil companies - obtain the concessions to produce oil. If the USA really owned the oil in the Middle East, rather than thinking they ought to own it - if all the Middle Eastern oil states were simply puppets of the American government - there would be no need for the US government to worry about Middle Eastern affairs. There would be no need to whip up propaganda about Libyan terrorism nor would

there have been any need, for example, to have bombed Tripoli in 1986!

Of course this is not to say that armed force or sanctions, or the diplomatic threat of force or sanctions, cannot alter property rights or be used to modify the effect of property rights, particularly in relation to such a vital commodity as oil. But the notion that the apparent ownership of oil can be simply dismissed as an illusion, that such property rights can simply be dismissed out of hand when capital is founded on the mutual recognition of the rights of property, is typical of the cavalier logic that we find throughout *Midnight Oil* - a point driven home by the fact that Caffentzis seems to feel little obligation to substantiate such assertions.

This then brings us back to the question of value. It would seem that the notion that rent is no longer significant, at least in the case of basic commodities such as oil, might open the way for the conscious manipulation of oil prices which seems so central to much of the historical analysis we find in *Midnight Oil*, without at the same time requiring the complete abandonment of Marx's theory of value.<sup>4</sup> While such a line of argument may be implicit elsewhere in *Midnight Oil*, Caffentzis himself refuses to take this way out. Instead, it would seem, he argues that it is the high organic composition of capital in the energy sector which allows the energy prices, such as that of oil, to escape in some way the 'law of value' and thereby allow its conscious manipulation against the working class.

In 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse', Caffentzis's analysis of the polarization of the organic composition of capital, away from the medium compositions exemplified by the car production towards the high organic composition industries such as nuclear power on the one side and the counter-balancing low composition industries such as fast foods on the other, offers us important insights. This is particularly true with regards to how this has affected how the working class experiences its exploitation. But neither in 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse' nor in his reply does Caffentzis adequately explain how the variations of in the organic composition of capital allow energy prices to escape the 'law of value'.

In 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse' Caffentzis, drawing on Marx's theory of the transformation of values into prices, seems to argue that because prices are necessarily much higher than values in industries with high organic compositions of capital (i.e., the price of commodities produced by these industries are above that warranted by the socially necessary labour-time added in their production) then this means that such industries are in a position to escape the 'law of value' and therefore are open to manipulation. As we pointed in our review, this argument is far from being sufficient. Indeed, in his theory of the transformation of values into prices Marx was seeking to show the very opposite! With his theory of transformation, Marx sought to show how, although prices may deviate from values between industries with varying compositions of capital, such deviations are systematic and therefore are still regulated by the socially necessary labour-time embodied in their production.

Significantly, neither in 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse' nor in his reply does Caffentzis explain the basis for standing Marx's theory of the transformation of values into prices on its head in this way. As a consequence, it would seem that Caffentzis fails to show how certain prices - such as energy prices - can escape the 'law of value'.



But, as we now know from his reply, Caffentzis doesn't after all see capital as a 'Cartesian subject' with a *conscious* strategy. Since for Marx the 'law of value' was the primary means through which capital constituted itself as a totality 'behind the backs' of the conscious intentions of individual capitalists, then perhaps Caffentzis doesn't need to 'escape' from the 'law of value'. But if this is so, how does this square with *Midnight Oil*'s 'two strategies' theory? And perhaps more importantly, how does it relate to the historical narratives in which various agents of social capital seem able to manipulate the prices of oil, food and exchange rate more or less at will? The answer would seem clear: it doesn't!

The fundamental problem that unites all the analysis that we find in *Midnight Oil* is that it fails to grasp the mediations through which capital as a totality must continually constitute itself. Caffentzis may seek ultimate refuge in the plea that he and *Midnight Oil* simply seek to emphasize class struggle which, when all is said and done, is the basis of all such categories as value, capital and prices. But, as he should know, *essence must appear*. It is necessary to see how and why class struggle becomes both reified and manifest in such categories as value, price and capital: that is, how capital as a totality constitutes itself out of its apparently disparate parts; and obversely how the working class comes to constitute itself against capital. And we have to make clear how such mediations and processes come to be circumscribed and modified in particular historical conditions and circumstances.

In the absence of any serious analysis of such mediations the reader has no option but to invoke capital as a 'Cartesian subject' with a conscious strategy, or else arbitrarily nominate various agents of the capital in the form of the US government, the UN, the IMF etc.

In failing to seriously consider these questions of mediation, Caffentzis fails to overcome the fundamental problem of the analysis that is developed throughout *Midnight Oil*. As a consequence, his supposed process of 'aufheben' at work in *Midnight Oil* between the early and late writings turns out to be little more than a rectification which produces more problems than it solves. In failing to seriously consider the question of mediations the analysis in *Midnight Oil* fails to stick together, it fails to cohere - it is incoherent.

Caffentzis concludes that ultimately it is all a matter of emphasis: while we want to turn up the melody of competition, he wants to turn up the volume of the bass of class struggle that breaks all the rules. We would conclude with a slight variation on his metaphor: however much you turn up the volume you can't hear the rhythm of the drummer without his drum.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps significantly, it was through the very development of his theory of rent that Marx came to show how 'labour-values' determine production prices, and hence market prices.

<sup>2</sup> Caffentzis claims in his reply that *Midnight Notes* do consider the question of rent in *Midnight Oil*. But to support this claim all he does is refer us to a couple of sentences buried deep in the article about the US bombing of Libya. Such a sketchy treatment of the theory of rent merely reflects *Midnight Notes*'s position that the question of rent has little relevance in the determination of oil prices.

<sup>3</sup> Having broken from the second claim, Caffentzis has not broken from the first!

<sup>4</sup> If rent no longer applies then price of oil is no longer regulated by its value (the socially necessary labour required for its production). In terms of value, it becomes indeterminate, allowing a 'degree of freedom' for political intervention in pricing.





*'I've been struggling all my life to get beyond the choice of living on my knees or dying on my feet. It's time we lived on our feet.'*

## Review:

### **Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr**

Pelegian Press, BCM Signpost, London WC1N 3XX



This book tells the story of the development of James Carr from an apolitical gang member, to a black nationalist associated with the Black Panther Party, and finally to a Korsch/Lukacs/Situationist-influenced position critical of the vanguardism of the Panthers. The book was first published in 1975. This new edition comes with an useful Afterword, written by BM Blob and News from Everywhere. Carr died young, and most of the book is taken up with the gang life and particularly the prison experiences preceding his eventual politicization. The Afterword puts his life in context (the then dominance of varieties of New Leftism, conflicts within the Black Panthers, and the crisis in the US prison system in the 1960s). It also points to the important differences between this book and other autobiographies of politicized prisoners: 'it avoids portraying the prisoner as a passive victim of social injustice - and also refuses the martyr role that liberals and leftists try to impose on convicts for their own fantasies and careers' (p. 200).

James Carr survived prison through strength, intelligence and ruthlessness, qualities which he applied not just to the screws and governors but also to his fellow inmates. Like other cons, Carr was involved in a war of all-against-all on two levels: first the interpersonal competition and bullying, and second the 'race' war between blacks, whites and Mexicans. In the book, graphic examples of inter-ethnic violence among prisoners illustrate how this relationship of divide-and-rule served the prison system. But the significance of Carr's experience and perspective is that he was in some of the biggest and most violent Californian prisons in the mid 1960s when a more politicized and united movement of prisoners began to develop. The movement emerged through a turn to black nationalism, which, Carr suggests, at least offered the possibility of enabling cons to see their connections with others in struggles outside the prison. The nationalist movement later developed into a movement against the prison structure itself, and attracted all the ethnic groups.

Carr has some acute comments to make on the limits of the movement. Though the conscious anti-racism was a great advance, the form of the movement remained guerrilla. In a memorable phrase, Carr says that '[g]uerrilla ideology reduces all revolutionary questions to quantitative problems of military force' (p. 169). The disastrous effects of this reduction included the death of his friend and influential militant activist George Jackson, as well as increasingly violent attacks by the authorities on organized prisoner revolts: a 'fight to the finish' was what the reactionary prison authorities wanted, says Carr.

The repressive response of the authorities to the movement only confirmed the opposition between the prison system and the cons as a whole. But Carr argues that 'even when the cons realized that they were all opposed to the system, they were prevented from locating themselves realistically within it: rather than recognize that they were on the margins of society and study strategically the development of society as a whole, they saw themselves as a class apart from the proletariat, or as its vanguard, and adopted an

ideology of class war by which the only battleground was the prison itself. They mistook the system's arm for its heart' (pp. 168-9).

In this ideology, because modern capitalism relies on coercion, then its coercive institutions are its essence or highest expression. It is true that, along with torture and the death penalty in many places, prison is typically the capitalist state's 'ultimate' sanction. But Carr is surely correct in suggesting that the prison is not a representative microcosm of modern class society. In fact, the reverse would seem to be the case: the prison is more an echo of feudalism, with its irrational petty rules, its separation of amount of work undertaken from means of subsistence, its social immobility, and its entrenched sets of interests in the form of the prison guards' organizations.

Carr also links this vanguardism with what he sees as leftism's romantic fetishization of crime. During the time of the political movement among prisoners, those on the outside promoted figures like George Jackson into rebel heroes; but, as Carr says, they were always tragic figures because their value to the movement was as martyrs. Leftists and anarchists rightly point out that there is a relation between capital and criminality; but the problem is how to grasp this relation without seeing the con, on the one hand, as necessarily a rebel hero or, on the other, as necessarily an anti-social element. Carr's analysis of what he calls the criminal mentality ('born to lose') shows how criminality in the form of robberies etc. is based on an antipathy to capital without necessarily being revolutionary. We steal because we don't want to work, says Carr - we want to have control over our lives. But if we have to keep on pulling bigger and bigger robberies to live and meet our developing needs, then we just perpetuate ourselves as robbers and ultimately as cons. As robbers and particularly as cons we might go beyond ourselves, as Carr and others did: by co-ordinating with others to resist the state, we fight capital rather than exist within its interstices. The experience of prison - the other side of the coin of the liberal-democratic ideology of rights and freedoms - has been shown on many occasions to have a politicizing effect on prisoners: cons commonly come to hate and resist the viciousness of the state machine. On the other hand, however, without potential support for such a project, the experience of state power and antagonism easily leads to individual survivalism or even to suicide.

Carr is scathing of prison reform, quoting Marx's argument that basing a revolutionary movement on it is like basing abolitionism on demands for better food for slaves. He criticizes his own actions for merely reacting to the initiative of the enemy - for fighting on their terrain. It is certainly true that all the time that the struggle remains within capital's procedures and concepts it remains a struggle within capital (for more fairness, rights etc.) rather than against it. However, Carr is perhaps being rather harsh on himself since, quoting Marx again, 'Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past' (1934/1852, p.



13)<sup>1</sup> As Carr's own story shows, rather than existing fully formed prior to the struggle, tendencies to push beyond given limits typically emerge from initial demands and conflicts which are more limited. If the present form of the capital relation - the current class composition - is a result of struggle between capital and proletariat, then neither of these forces are always pure; anti-capitalism is mediated by existing capitalism, particularly the latter's progressive tendencies.

More pessimistically, perhaps, just as moderate demands can go beyond themselves in the struggle itself, so militant struggles can feed back into a reassertion of the legitimacy of the prison system on a new basis. Prison history is the history of violent prison struggles and with them various kinds of liberal reforms and reactionary backlashes. Strangeways, 1990, for example, progressed from an initial plan among prisoners for a limited protest, to a practical critique of the prison in the struggle itself (with cons taking over and trashing the building); the riot then fed into a set of liberal reforms (the ending of slopping out); and finally it served as the justification for legislation for harsher punishments for future rebels (the offence of prison mutiny). This is not of course an argument against resistance or demands for better conditions among prisoners,

since any victories by militant prisoners are to be welcomed, and all support (in the form of letters etc.) for individual militants is to be encouraged, particularly if there are links with struggles on the outside.

This book is an autobiography rather than a book of theory, and James Carr led a pretty incredible life by anyone's standards. Of all the incredible things in the book, including the massacres, killings and maimings Carr took part in, it is perhaps his weight-lifting feats that are most hard to believe. The prison lifestyle was often one of privation and drug-taking, yet at one stage Carr apparently trained for five hours a day (exhausting even for today's steroid-fuelled bodybuilders) and bench-pressed 520lb! Not only this, but despite the fact that he was a heavyweight, his waist measurement was only 27 inches.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart*. Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society. (Originally published 1852.)

## Review:

### *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties*

by George McKay

London: Verso



This is a book that has already been dismissed with contempt by many people we know within the movement(s) it describes. Various types of criticisms have been expressed, but what they share overall is a dislike of McKay's 'approach' to his subject matter. In our language, this approach is one of *recuperation* - it is an attempt (not necessarily deliberate) to appropriate antagonistic expressions and render them harmless through transformation and integration into some form of commodity (in this case, academia and the world of coffee-table publishing). Recuperation is a constant danger for anti-capitalist practice. However, we don't think that this book is a particularly powerful example of this, because it is too flawed even within its own terms.

The purpose of the book, according to the author, is to show the historical continuity in such movements as the free festivals, 'new age' travellers, anarcho-punk, rave, anti-roads and anti-Criminal Justice Bill (CJB). The book's publication might be viewed as symptomatic of the growing trend among academics (McKay 'has been' a punk, anarchist and squatter, according to the blurb, but is now a university lecturer) to come to terms with the popularity of direct action, particularly in the eco-movement. McKay's book is within the cultural studies tradition, which allows it to depart from other recent work (typically written from the perspectives of sociology and political science) in an important way: it presents itself as not only an academic work but one from within the movement itself.

From a marketing point of view, this is obviously the best of both worlds. The book appears in the sociology sections of the book shops, but is also displayed prominently in the new books promotions in order to attract those within or sympathetic to the movements (its cover features a well-known

photograph from the Twyford Down anti-road campaign). From our point of view, however, McKay's attempt to commentate simultaneously as both insider and outsider has serious problems. In the first place, surely if anything is of value in an *academic* work, it is its systematicity and scholarship. Cultural studies, however, while breaking down interdisciplinary boundaries, has little of the empirical rigour, of say, sociology. This book is impressionistic, not in the sense that it lacks evidence, but in that its choice of material and subject matter heavily reflects the author's personal experience and liberal preferences.

Second, the value of a piece of analysis or theory from *within* an antagonistic movement is its grasp of the nature of the movement in *practical* terms: why certain activities are carried out, how the movement might succeed in its practical aims, etc. McKay's book certainly takes sides (against the police and government, albeit from a civil rights perspective), but too often he analyses the nature of the movement(s) in terms of *ideas and symbols* rather than practices.

The sections on the free festivals and fairs of the 1970s are written by McKay in his role as someone who took part. For those of us who don't know much about these scenes, McKay's account presents itself as a detailed and useful history, indicating some of the conflicts among those involved as well as their run-ins with the cops etc. However, given what McKay has written about movements that we *do* have some knowledge of, it might be best to treat this early history with some caution.

Thus in the chapters on the anti-roads and CJB movement, McKay appears very much as someone looking in from the outside and relying on secondary sources. His



references to features of the No M11 Campaign, in particular, are strewn with minor unnecessary errors of the sort we expect from journalists. For example, to refer to the 'ancient chestnut tree of Wanstonia' (p. 150) is an anachronism; the 'independent free area of Wanstonia' only came into being around a month after the felling of the Wanstead chestnut tree.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the first collective action against the Criminal Justice Act was on the M11 link road (November 3rd 1994) not the M25 (p. 169). McKay is only saved from making still worse mistakes by the benevolent intervention of some of those involved in *SchNews* (the anti-CJA newsletter) who checked some of his early drafts.

In the chapters on the anti-roads and CJB/A movements, the book draws upon some of the analysis presented previously in *Aufheben*<sup>2</sup> but also badly misrepresents some of our arguments, as well as those of *Counter Information*, in order to position McKay as supporting 'diversity' and us as narrow-minded and sectarian. For example, in our commentary on the Brighton 'Justice?' courthouse squat of 1994, we argued that the different uses to which those involved wanted to put the building (e.g., discussion groups on squatting, art displays, drumming workshops) meant that the squat was neither a centre for a 'community of struggle' nor a community arts centre as such; it fell between stools. However, although demands were often contradictory and competed with each other for space, they did express the participants' various needs. This was *unlike* the attempt by the fluffier elements involved to *deny* their own needs by subordinating them to media representationalism. For example, their own desires for sensual pleasure took second place to appeasing the media through a public anti-drugs policy. Worse still, in order to portray a certain image of themselves and their struggle, they argued (unsuccessfully) that the courthouse squat should be abandoned without any resistance; in other words, they were even prepared to give up their own 'community arts space' for the sake of a media representation of themselves! McKay simply characterizes our criticism as *Aufheben* regarding 'poetry' as not 'hardline' enough.

McKay is perhaps right to observe that those involved in the present movement(s) could benefit from being more aware of previous struggles. But in what sense do they share a 'heritage', as McKay suggests? What is the nature of their common resistance? For McKay, what these movements share are 'themes'. Thus, what renders the free party movement political rather than merely hedonistic, he argues, is its reproduction of counter-cultural features of the 1960s - the free festival 'ethos', for example. In the book, this essentially *cultural* approach to struggles reaches its nadir in the chapter on anarcho-punk. The chapter is solely taken up with the band Crass rather than with the movement itself and is particularly concerned with analysing the meanings in the band's textual productions.

A telling example of the clash between McKay's analysis of 'meanings' and the perspective of the participants he writes about is relegated to a footnote in the anti-roads chapter. McKay interprets the tunnels, tree-houses and benders constructed on the anti-A30 camps between Honiton and Exeter as 'a politicized retreat into the pleasure sites of childhood' (p. 156). The Road Alert! bods rebuked him,

arguing that these constructions were rather 'innovative, low-tech, good defensive tactics, cheap and easy to build with readily available materials, low-impact, movable, and don't leave marks' (p. 202).

Similarly, McKay emphasizes some participants' comments on the symbolic features of the Claremont Road scaffold tower ('a critical parody of the Canary Wharf tower, an update of Tatlin's unbuilt monument to the Russian Revolution...'), adding almost as an afterthought that it functioned as an effective obstruction to bailiffs. Though he lauds the artwork of Claremont Road, McKay does not mention that the *Aufheben* article he quotes from so extensively<sup>3</sup> highlights the *tension* in Claremont Road between art and barricading. This was not a conflict over the importance of aesthetics and symbols *per se*, but an eminently *practical* matter. It was a struggle over which strategy would be most effective in the overall anti-roads argument - whether *exposing* the brutality of the state or physically *hindering* the state would contribute most in the anti-roads war. The perspective taken in this book, then, tends to get things precisely backwards: symbols appear more important than the social relations that bear them.

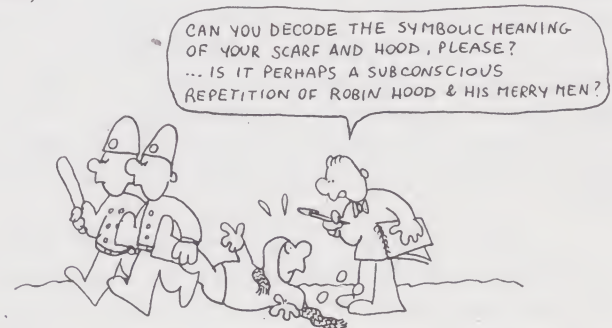
McKay wants his book to be seen as a part of the movement(s) he describes, but its approach is quite alien to them. Essentially it renders the movements as fodder for the cultural studies industry. From the perspective of those of us who have been participating in the contemporary movement(s), through its commitment to the cultural studies approach, *Senseless Acts of Beauty* is not only weak as a history but blinkered in its analysis. Although the book is supposedly a history of struggles, McKay fails to develop the obvious point that otherwise 'escapist' or pleasure-seeking movements become 'politicized' because of their (often unexpected) antagonistic relations with the forces of the state: in the struggles, they are forced to defend themselves, and to see the incompatibility between their initially limited desires for 'freedom' and the incessant demands for conformity and compromise from capital and the state. The themes and cultural expressions that particular struggles share with others emerge because of their parallel *practical* relations with their class enemy in the form of the cops.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See 'Auto-Struggles' in *Aufheben* 3.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Kill or Chill' in *Aufheben* 4.

<sup>3</sup> This article, 'The politics of anti-roads protest', appears in the M11 fanzine *The End of the Beginning: Claremont Road* (Clare Zine, PO Box HP 171, Leeds, LS6 1XX).



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## Aufheben

(past tense: *hob auf*; p.p. *aufgehoben*; noun: *Aufhebung*)

*Aufheben* has no English equivalent. In popular German it normally has two main meanings which are in opposition. One is negative: 'to abolish', 'to annul', 'to cancel' etc. The other is positive: 'to supersede', 'to transcend'. Hegel exploited this duality of meaning and used the word to describe the positive-negative action whereby a higher form of thought or nature supersedes a lower form, while at the same time 'preserving' its 'moments of truth'. The proletariat's revolutionary negation of capitalism, communism, is an instance of this positive-negative movement of supersession, as is its theoretical realization in Marx's method of critique.



*Aufheben*